

Questions from Residents

Items from the West Resident Association Meeting 23/10/18

Question: Maintenance and protection of green areas

The meeting raised two connected issues:

- a) Residents really value the green spaces and trees in their area, enjoy these and want to protect them. Sometimes trees and bushes can be removed without consultation or any information about why (recent examples include bushes at Clarendon and Ellen, and trees in Stonery Close).*
- b) If bushes, trees and grass areas are not maintained they become a nuisance, and are one of the most common causes of complaints from residents.*

Proper management and protection of green spaces is needed. The meeting asked for some information from the Council on how they do this. The following questions were raised:

- Does the Council have any regulations protecting trees? How is this affected by them being on private property?*
- Who makes decisions about the removal of trees? Is this done by people with relevant qualifications and knowledge?*
- What maintenance of green spaces is carried out by the Council?*

Response: Robert Walker, Head of Operations- Cityparks, Tel: 01273 294349

Does the council have any regulations to protect trees? How is this affected by them being on private property?

Yes; the council must have regard to protecting trees as some are protected by law. It is essential for anyone considering doing any work to a tree to check its legal status prior to starting work. Doing unauthorised work to protected trees could lead to prosecution. There are a number of ways trees can be protected. Some examples include; Tree Protection Orders (TPOs), by conservation areas or by restrictive covenants (when selling land). The council does not normally apply TPOs to trees on its own land.

Who makes decisions about them the removal of trees? Is this done by people with relevant qualifications and knowledge?

Decisions about trees with TPOs on them are made by the arboriculturalist except if removal is part of a planning application in which case the arboriculturalist's opinion will be asked for but the final decision will rest with the planning officer or planning committee. On Housing land Housing seek the opinion of the arboriculturalist but the final decision rests with Housing except if the tree is an imminent danger in which case Housing have agreed that the arboriculturalist can make an immediate decision.

What maintenance of green spaces is carried out by the council?

Currently the council's direct work force maintains housing land, parks, streets, civic building sand some schools and museums. Specialist contractors are sometimes used including for tree work. Housing land is currently being reviewed as the previous time the schedule of work was reviewed was 2009. The contract is maintained through a service charge paid by council residents.

Question: Estate Development Budget (EDB) underspend

The meeting unanimously agreed to ask that any underspend in the West Estate Development Budget goes back into the West Area budget, rather than into a central pool.

The reasons for this are:

- *If major items are refused there is no opportunity to put in a different bid.*
- *Sometimes people put in for items that have recently been excluded from EDB budgets, and then do not have an opportunity to put in a different bid.*
- *West Area should have control over its own budget and be able to make decisions about how it is spent.*

It was agreed that this is a decision for West to make, and does not need to be agreed by every Area, who can make their own decisions about their areas.

Response: Hilary Edgar, Housing Service Operations Manager, Tel: 01273 293250

EDB underspends are added to the citywide reserves and these are currently used to supplement the base EDB budget to provide more funding for residents' projects. In 2018/19 the EDB budget is £348,000 with £178,000 direct revenue funding and £170,000 from EDB reserves.

Ring fencing underspends to one particular area would mean topping up the base budget wouldn't be possible and perpetuate an imbalance in funding where an area that struggled to spend its budget in one year would have more the next, while an area which had more bids than budget, would have less money the following year. Now that funds are reducing it seems only fair that any underspends are put back into 'the pot' to be allocated over the whole city so that the maximum number of EDB bids can be funded and delivered.

At the last review of the EDB residents told us that being fair was important to them as was an understanding of how the budget worked. We are currently reviewing the

EDB, including the points identified in the question, and will be updating residents on the proposals leading from this review at the next panel meeting.

Items from the North Residents Only Meeting 1/11/18

Question: Field Officers

After December 2018 there will no longer be a dedicated Environment noise patrols team at night, and the role will be taken on by the Field Officers. However, they will only work from 12 noon until 8pm at night.

The meeting was very concerned about this reduction in the noise patrols, particularly as most problems with noisy parties happen late at night.

Response: Annie Sparks, Regulatory Services Manager, Tel: 01273 292436

On 22 January 2018 a report was presented to the Neighbourhoods Inclusion, Communities and Equalities Committee (NICE.) The report set out the Business Case for a new Field Officer role as part of the wider Communities & Neighbourhoods Portfolio. The role will deliver fast effective enforcement action but also work 7 days a week with our communities to promote behaviour change and community collaboration.

Committee agreed the funding and resources required for the set-up of the Field Officer and this included moving £42,000 from the existing Noise Patrol service into the Field Officer service, and reviewing how noise services are delivered out of hours

The Noise Patrol service has been operating for over 20 years and over that time the service delivery model and the hours and days of operation have changed very little.

The service operates Friday and Saturday 22.00 hours – 03.00 hours. Two officers work together and deliver the service Citywide, which depending on the call pattern can result in significant travelling times, and delayed response times for our customers.

Operating under this model currently costs £42k per annum. In 2016/17 there were 420 complaints to the Noise Patrol Service and these involved 239 visits to customers. This works out at £176 per visit.

The data shows that since 2011 the total number of complaints each year has declined, and has plateaued at much lower levels over the last three years. Noise complaints show a seasonal trend, with the majority of complaints received between May and September.

In recent years we have witnessed changing trends and challenges in relation to drug and alcohol use, knife attacks, and most recently 'acid attacks'. This ever changing environment and changing social trends are presenting new risks to the staff that deliver this service. Reductions in Police resources often mean that police support is delayed or not available so in reality physically stopping a large party, or getting the music reduced to an acceptable level is not going to happen.

Likewise where someone is causing a disturbance and under the influence of drugs and or alcohol stopping the noise that night rarely happens for a variety of reasons, including access denied, risk, and lack of cooperation.

What can practically be achieved on the night to stop the noise safely and without risk is becoming an increasing challenge. It is therefore proposed that from December Field Officers will follow up the complaint the following day. This is a far safer and more practical solution. The Field Officer Services operate 7 days a week 12.00 to 20.00. Following up the complaint the following day will enable all parties to have a rational discussion and explore how future noise problems can be prevented.

Staff in the Environmental Protection Team will continue to work flexibly out of hours to respond to ongoing noise complaints. We will continue to use digital noise recording equipment to gather evidence and enable notice abatement notices to be served. We will also continue to develop partnership working with the Police to witness noise from persistent offenders.

This is an opportunity to modernise how we deliver noise services out of hours and review how this resource could better serve our communities and be better value for money.

Any crime and disorder issues should still be reported to the Police.

Items from the East Residents Only meeting 18/10/18

Question: Future arrangements for repairs & maintenance of council housing

The Council has now announced that, from April 2020, the responsive repairs and refurbishment of empty properties will be carried out by an in-house service. There will be a multi-contractor tendering process for major capital projects and specialist work (such as lifts and adaptations) will be carried out by named contractors.

The meeting felt this decision had been taken very quickly and without the level of consultation that residents had been promised and led to expect.

There were concerns that bringing the day-to-day repairs in-house may mean there is insufficient oversight of the service provided.

The following information is requested:

- Why was the decision to bring responsive repairs in-house taken so quickly, without giving for the time for residents comments and input, given the current contract was not due to end until March 2020?*
- What procedures will be put in place to ensure that complaints are dealt with thoroughly and independently?*

Response: Sharon Davies, Housing Business Programme Manager, Tel: 01273 291295

Why was the decision to bring responsive repairs in-house taken so quickly, without giving for the time for residents comments and input, given the current contract was not due to end until March 2020?

Thank you for your question, the following decisions were agreed at Housing and New Homes Committee on 26th September and also in Policy Resources and Growth Committee on 11th October.

Councillors have carefully considered how these services should be delivered in the future and have made the following decisions:

- Deliver customer service and quality assurance services in-house
- Deliver responsive repairs and empty property refurbishment work to council housing through an in-house team
- Set up contracts to provide planned maintenance and improvement programmes
- Set up a multi-contractor framework agreement for major capital projects
- Continue to deliver specialist work, such as gas servicing and maintenance, lifts, adaptations, etc. through individual contracts

The programme team undertook a number of engagement exercises to ensure that all stakeholders' views were considered in determining the preferred options for the delivery of works and services in the future.

Programme officers initially attended the following meetings to provide an initial brief of the programme and next steps for tenant and leaseholder engagement:

- Area Panels
- Home Service Improvement Group
- Leaseholder Action Group – Annual General Meeting
- Business and Value For Money Service Improvement Group

Area Panel meetings provided some initial feedback around the current contractual arrangements and raised some questions about delivery methods moving forward - feedback was included in the March 2018 report to Housing & New Homes Committee.

Representatives at the Home Service Improvement Group were keen to be updated at future meetings of the progress of the programme and noted the scale of the programme.

The programme team presented on the programme at the Leaseholders Action Group (LAG) – Annual General Meeting in April 2018 and have worked with the newly elected LAG representatives to engage with leaseholders and collect feedback on the current arrangements.

Leaseholders fed back that they welcomed the opportunity to be engaged in the programme alongside the work being undertaken to improve engagement with leaseholders. Other feedback included that the council should ensure value for money is being delivered through major capital projects and that there should be stronger focus on planned maintenance programmes through future delivery arrangements.

The programme team completed the following engagement activities ahead of the committee meetings detailed above:

- Running four workshops for tenants and leaseholders to share their views on what works well with the current service, what doesn't and what we should change in the future.
- Carried out over 1,000 door to door surveys of tenants and leaseholders across the city.
- An online and postal survey for tenants and leaseholders to feedback views was open for 6 weeks from July 2018.

The workshops were promoted in "Homing In", the council's website and social media channels, by email to resident groups and in a letter to Tenants and Residents Associations across the city. Tenants and leaseholders who attended these workshops were highly engaged and gave detailed feedback about how the service could be delivered in the future.

Tenants particularly identified the following areas for future services:

- Tenants felt that estates as a 'whole' could do with better maintenance and investment for example the look of doorways, clearing guttering, grounds

maintenance, the look and feel of blocks and neighbourhoods could be better invested in and maintained.

- Tenants discussed the importance of communication from the council and contractors, more consideration around disabilities or vulnerabilities, better communication for missed appointments, ID for subcontractors and more discussion with tenants when jobs cannot be completed first time.
- Tenants discussed the importance of a localised, visible service including locally employed staff, apprentices and a 'patch' type approach to neighbourhoods for repairs.
- Tenants wanted to see more appointment times with more defined time slots. Including evenings and weekends by the hour rather than AM/PM.
- Tenants felt the apprenticeship scheme is positive and should continue to be a priority to the council.
- Tenants felt that the use of subcontractors should be reviewed to improve performance for example cleaning up after repairs, parking issues and requirements to carry identification.
- Tenants felt that the kitchens and bathroom replacement programme (Brighton and Hove standard) is positive and would like to see it continue and expand.

Leaseholders particularly identified the following areas for future services:

- Leaseholders felt that investment into managing warranties, developing maintenance programmes and regular reviewing of assets, should be a key focus to prevent deterioration of homes and blocks.
- Leaseholders felt that 'major capital projects' should not sit with the repairs and empty property refurbishment works moving forward and should be specified and tendered separately from this function.
- Value for money was a key driver for leaseholders and testing and value for money through tender processes for major capital works was a key consideration.

- Quality assurance and surveying functions were highlighted by leaseholders as essential client side functions that should be independent of any contractual arrangement.
- Leaseholders felt that increased communication, transparency and online access to cost information would improve services going forward.

The results of the independent door to door surveys and the online and paper surveys were analysed by ARP Research and full results were included as an appendix to the committee report and published on the council website.

Some key feedback from surveys showed that tenants and resident who took part in the consultation were generally very satisfied with the repairs and maintenance services that they currently received. This was typified by the responsive repairs service, where satisfaction was high at 89%, including two thirds that were 'very' satisfied.

Similarly, 85% rated the repairs reporting system as good, whilst satisfaction with internal improvements was very high at 96%.

An online reporting system received high levels of support with over three quarters saying it would make reporting repairs easier for them. In fact, when asked in their how the service could be improved, 43% of respondents specifically mentioned an online option, including a quarter that suggested an 'app'.

Through this process the programme team have been keen to engage with residents proactively and in sessions that suit residents. As such the team have been invited to meet with residents at the Business & Value for Money Service Improvement Group and the Resident Inspectors group.

In September 2018 members of the programme team attended the four Area Panel meetings and the Leaseholder Action Group to feedback on the resident engagement activities undertaken and update residents on the next steps for the programme.

Although the current contract ends in March 2020 the council is required to carry out various procurement and formal leaseholder consultation activities as well as the processes required transferring staff and services in-house. It is expected that these activities will take 18 months to deliver from beginning to mobilisation in April 2020 to ensure services are delivered to residents across the city. Therefore it was important that these decisions were reached in line with the timetable that was shared with Area Panels in February which set out that decisions would be made in September and October 2018.

What procedures will be put in place to ensure that complaints are dealt with thoroughly and independently?

The council is committed to delivering a high level service that customers are satisfied with. In the event that this does not happen the council has a robust complaints procedure that is centrally monitored and controlled. Housing complaints regarding the repairs service can be directed to the council's central Customer Feedback Team as well as directly to the housing service moving forward.

The council has clear processes to follow to make sure that every complaint is dealt with fairly and sorted out as quickly as possible. For most complaints there are different stages that we follow.

Informal stage

Where possible, the Customer Feedback Team will do their best to resolve the issue for you. If you are not happy with the outcome of this you can go through a formal complaints procedure.

Formal complaint - first stage

Your complaint will be handled by the service you're complaining about. You can talk to them again if you are unhappy with parts of their reply.

Formal complaint - second stage

If you are still unhappy you can ask to take your complaint to Stage 2 where it will be looked at by the Customer Feedback Team, who are independent of the department your complaint is about.

The Ombudsman

If you are still not satisfied with the response you can approach the Local Government Ombudsman or the Housing Ombudsman Service (if your complaint is about housing).

Currently Mears employ a customer service team (the repairs helpdesk) who deal with direct complaints from residents, this function will transfer into the council. The repairs helpdesk will continue to work together with the Housing Customer Services Team and our Customer Feedback team to ensure complaints are dealt with effectively.

Question: Cash rent payments for pensioners

As pensioners can no longer pay their rent at Post Offices, many now have to withdraw cash from the Post Office and then walk to the Housing Office to pay their rent. They feel very vulnerable when having to do this.

A solution was proposed to the meeting, that the Post Office could be asked to set up a pop-up Post Office in the Housing Office once a week, or once a month. This would enable pensioners to collect their pension and then pay it directly into the rent office, without having to walk around with large amounts of cash in their bags or pockets.

It was agreed to submit this to Residents Questions at the Area Panel to request that the option of setting up a regular pop-up Post Office in the rent office be investigated.

**Response: Hilary Edgar, Housing Service Operations Manager,
Tel: 01273 293250**

Housing offices haven't had rent offices for some years, so there would be no benefit in considering a pop up Post Office in these, if the intention is to enable tenants to withdraw money and pay rent in the same building.

The East Panel asked a question about rent payments earlier this year and I have included an extract of the response that was given then, below, as it contains the current advice on payment methods for tenants.

'Although customers are no longer able make payments through the Post Office, many Post Offices are located within shops which are PayPoint outlets. There are approximately 150 PayPoint outlets in the Brighton & Hove area, still enabling residents to make their rent payments when collecting their money from the Post Office, or buying their groceries.

For those customers who have a transactional bank account there are alternative payment methods to PayPoint and direct debit:

- By debit card online using our secure server
- By bank standing order
- By telephone ~ 01273 291908 24 hours a day

For those tenants who do not have a transactional bank account and manage their money weekly in cash, while cash payments should not be sent by post, payment can be made by postal order and sent to:

Housing Centre

Unit 1

Fairway Trading Estate

Eastergate Road

Brighton

BN2 4QL'

Items from the Central Residents Only Meeting 1/11/18

Question: Tenant scrutiny of repairs and maintenance service

It was noted that when the Council's contract with Mears ends in 2020, parts of this service will be taken in house and run by the Council.

It was proposed that a committee of tenants is set up, to scrutinise and monitor the change-over and new service. It was noted that many tenants have experience in building and construction, and have a lot to contribute.

Response: Sharon Davies, Housing Business Programme Manager, Tel: 01273 291295

Thank you for your suggestion in regards to tenant engagement throughout the changes in relation to repairs and maintenance services that will be in place from April 2020.

Currently the Housing Service consults with residents through several forums including:

- Home Service Improvement Group
- Area Panels
- Leaseholder Action Group

We will continue to engage through these groups as part of the works required to set up new services post April 2020. Will also engage with the Partnership Core Group alongside these groups to monitor and assess works under the current contract until April 2020.

Communications to all residents will be delivered through:

- Social media
- Homing In
- BHCC Website
- Post (later in the process to advise of service changes)

The programme team we will also engage with a smaller group of residents for the evaluation of tenders as a result of procurement activity for services post April 2020. This will be on a voluntary basis as may involve scoring parts of bids received from contractors.

In your suggestion I note that you state the need to scrutinise and monitor the change-over and new service. It is important to note that the role of the Home Service Improvement Group has the following aims and objectives:

Aims:

- Making sure the work the council housing department does meets the needs of residents and the building.
- Making sure that excellent communication happens between tenants, Mears and council housing officers.
- Making sure the delivery of services is equal across the whole of the cities council housing properties.

Objectives:

- Representatives contribute meaningfully and constructively to topics in meetings, sub groups and projects; in particular Core and Partnership groups, Estate Development Budget panel and Resident Assessors project.
- All Home Group members continually build confidence and skills in order to contribute and effectively report to and from different activities through accessing training, mentoring and support from the council and externally.

- Ensuring Area panels and Tenant Only meetings are able to engage with these aims & objectives, the groups' work plan and feedback on their areas service delivery.

As this group is already in place and has been regularly attended by the programme team we propose to add these activities to the work plan of the Home Service and Improvement Group and that we engage this group to deliver your requirements. As is detailed in the objectives above - this will include engagement with Area Panels to deliver the work plan.