

Central Area Panel Residents Questions

December 2021

Central and West Area 3 Stars

Task and Finish Groups

Background

Structure of Task and finish groups Central: The Environment Task and Finish group and the Anti-social Behaviour Task and Finish group should be chaired by residents and facilitated, not directed, by officers. These groups were established following requests from residents and focus on issues that have been consistently raised as problems of major concern. It's important that they are resident led and properly explore the concerns of residents, which can be more effectively done with a resident Chair. The officer's role is to facilitate and support this process.

West: These are all the task and finish groups, all services improvement groups and any other groups for example TDN. It has always been recognised that the reps are voted for on Area Panel meetings every two years and we would get a list of the groups and reps. The officer's role is to facilitate, enable, support, take minutes in this process.

Action

Request that the Environment Task and Finish group and the Anti-social Behaviour Task and Finish group are restructured so they are chaired and led by residents and focus on the concerns of residents. Barry Hughes will also bring this issue to the attention of the Chairs of Housing.

West: Could we please be provided with a list of all current groups including task and finish with a list of the reason behind each group?

Response

The Residents Associations, Service Improvement Groups and Citywide Groups/Sub-Groups are chaired by residents and we're wary of overburdening individuals with additional meetings and responsibilities, however we would like to offer to trial this suggested approach for the calendar year 2022/2023. As Task and Finish Groups are set up with a specific purpose and are time limited, we would require chairs to undergo additional training in order for them to be able to guide these meetings to be as productive and focussed as possible.

We'd be happy to provide the West Area Panel Representative with the list of current groups

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Role of Field Officers

Background

Central residents would like an update on the role and function of Field Officers. Central residents do not have much contact with Field Officers and are unsure of their value and purpose. Residents Associations used to have regular Estate Inspections with Housing Officers, which formed a useful and important part of Resident Associations' work. It was hoped that Field Officers would take over this role.

West: When will there be Estate inspection dates? We understand Estate inspections seem to have started up again?

Action

Request a report (needs to include how many officers there are currently) on the Field Officer programme, covering what work they do, what this costs the Housing Revenue Account (HRA), what the benefits are to residents and Residents Associations and whether they can do Estate Inspections. Theresa Renolds should be invited.

West: Please provide a timetable of inspection dates.

Response

The Field Officer team consists of 6 x full time and 2 x Part time members of staff. Their core working hours 12pm-8pm. The team returned to carrying out visits in April this year. The HRA funds £51,000 per year towards the cost of Field Officers.

They have carried out witnessing tasks for Housing in the last few months and are currently working with Housing colleagues on linking their work to estate inspections. Currently we are planning to have two Field Officers carrying out inspections in each of the 4 Housing areas. This is so that they will get to know the Housing teams and build relationships with residents. This will also enable them to become familiar with the different areas. We are currently planning how we start up estate inspections and what staffing resource will be needed. We aim to get to a position where we are including information online in relation to the inspections as to when and how they will take place.

A further update will be provided at the next round of Area Panels.

Central and East Area

3 Stars

Sustainability

Background

Home Insulation: Central residents would like to see money allocated in the 2022-3 budget for a programme of home insulation. There is an urgency to reduce carbon emissions and a programme to insulate homes could be started on immediately. It is important that this is carried out to a high standard and problems currently experienced with poor retrofitting work are addressed. Practically, for example insurance about insulation in the roof and cooling in housing blocks during the summer.

Transfer to low-carbon heating: Information has not been circulated clearly to residents about how the Council proposes to manage a transfer from gas to air source or ground source heat pump technology for heating council housing stock. This issue was discussed at the Citywide Conference, but this discussion has not reached the majority of tenants and leaseholders. Leaseholders, in particular, need to be kept informed about plans that will incur costs to them.

Action

It was agreed to ask the council for a report detailing their plans for moving from gas heating to air source or ground source heat pumps for existing and new council housing properties.

Response

Please see the attached report, Carbon Reduction in Housing. This was considered at Housing committee on the 17th November and provides an update on actions and future plans to reduce carbon across the city's housing stock.

As you will see in the report it is acknowledged that the transition away from gas fired heating and hot water services to renewable sources. Air Source Heat Pumps (ASHP) and Ground Source Heat Pumps (GSHP) will have a significant role to play in this alongside more efficient forms of electric heating and new technologies as they are developed and scaled up. We have experience of installing ASHPs on a small scale but expect to see the installation of these significantly increase in the next few years. Housing is installing its first GSHP at the Victoria development in Portslade.

As you will see in the report over the coming months we will be developing a more detailed plan as to how Housing will improve our stock to contribute towards the 2030 carbon Neutral target, we will continue to update residents as this develops as we recognise how important this is to you and the key role residents will play in delivering on the plan. There will be further reports to housing committee in the next few months that will also give more detail and context as to how heating and hot water services will be provided in the future, in particular a new contract for these services from 2023 onwards.

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There is a budget allocation for 2022/23 for energy efficiency and renewable projects and this budget is likely to be increasing significantly over the coming years, these will be detailed in the budget papers to be considered by committee in the new year. We recognise the potential impact on leaseholders and acknowledge the concern this may cause. As we develop workstreams and specific projects on blocks of flats or neighborhoods we will ensure that we engage at an early stage to gather views and address any concerns we can at an early stage.

East , North and Central Area

3 Stars

Grounds maintenance service and weeds

Background

The increasing weeds, overgrown shrubs and uncut grass are becoming a hazard for residents. The council's decision to stop the use of glyphosates has not been matched with an increase in staffing levels to ensure the city is kept tidy and safe. Residents felt that the council should investigate the option of using alternative, safe herbicides to address this problem. This issue was raised at the Area Panel on October 12th and the response was "We are now exploring use of a contractor, who is able to weed without use of chemical pesticides." Residents felt that this response did not address the question raised, which was about alternative (non-glyphosate) herbicides.

Weeds: There has been an ongoing problem with grass cutting and weeds growing over pavements since the council stopped using glyphosate. While the council have started to allocate more resources to this and that the grass has been cut, weeds have been left to grow on the pavements and along the kerbs.

This is a health and safety hazard: the weeds get slippery during wet weather, people are unable to see the edge of the kerb and likely to trip, and it's difficult for those with walking difficulties or disabilities to negotiate the pavement.

Action

It was agreed to raise this again at the Agenda Setting meeting and request a report from CityParks on non-glyphosate herbicides.

Residents would like to know what the Council's plan is for removing weeds on pavements and kerbs in the area on a regular basis.

Response

Thank you for your question. CityParks currently use two non-glyphosate herbicides. Icade: for the treatment of tough, invasive and woody vegetation; specifically used to treat outbreaks of Japanese Knotweed.

Katoun Gold: a natural herbicide for hard surfaces and around obstacles. It is a 'contact' not a 'systemic' herbicide, meaning it kills surface vegetation it touches but is

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not transmitted through the plant's system to kill underground roots. The result being more rapid regrowth requiring more frequent treatments.

As set out in the response to the last Area Panel meeting, managing weeds is challenging without the use of glyphosate herbicide. Since the last Area Panel Housing have deployed the use of a private contractor to clear areas of Housing land where health and safety hazards. The hard surfaces team have also continued with weed clearance using mechanical means. I appreciate this is an important issue for residents, we will continue to monitor and respond to areas that may need more attention.

East Area

3 Stars

Officer attendance at Area Panel meetings

Background

Written responses to residents' questions are often not the best way to get information across. The meeting felt that it would be better to ask officers responding to residents' questions to attend the Area Panel meeting and give their responses personally. This would enable residents to clarify or ask additional questions. For example, the responses to two of the questions raised by East Residents at the October Area Panel (Grounds maintenance and Graffiti) misunderstood or didn't fully answer the actual questions submitted. Because the officers were not present at the Area Panel, residents have to repeatedly raise issues again, instead of being able to follow up immediately with further questions and clarifications

Action

It was agreed to raise this at the Agenda Setting meeting and ask if officers giving responses could also agree to be present at the meeting (even if this is only for a few minutes) to ensure that their response adequately addresses the questions.

Response

I appreciate the feedback from residents on this part of the Area Panels meetings, I do recognise that there is sometimes difficulty in resolving an issue due to follow up questions not being able to be answered at the time the response is discussed. It is important to balance the opportunity for attendees to ask relevant questions and clarify points with the other topics on the agenda. Whilst it might not always be possible for the responding officer to attend, this will be looked at as part of the Area Panel review planned for early next year.

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Allergies

Background

The allocations process should take into account issues in the immediate environment of properties being let, which may make them unsuitable for some tenants. Craven Vale Community Association has installed a beehive on the estate, following a process of full consultation with the Neighbours. Subsequently, a family moved into a neighbourhood property, who were unaware that the beehive was about to be installed, and were unhappy due to a phobia or allergy to bees.

Action

It was agreed to raise this at the Agenda Setting meeting and ask if a note can be made on HomeMove of which properties have beehives (or other potential allergy triggers) nearby in order to make this information available to potential bidders.

Response

We have explored the possibility of including this information, I can confirm that unfortunately we cannot safely and reliably update the Homemove system with information regarding proximity to beehives or other potential allergens / phobic triggers.

North Area 3 Stars

Tackling anti-social behaviour in high rise blocks

Background

Residents have been told by Council officers that nothing can be done about tackling the reported issues with anti-social behaviour, particularly in reference to the situation at Nettleton Court and Dudeney Lodge (See Minutes of North Area Residents Only Meetings: Item 4 from 24th August 2021). They have been told to report problems to the police. The police have been called on numerous occasions (Agenda Setting items from North Area Residents Meeting 26th October 2021 Page 2 of 5), but they are unable to resolve the problem in the long-term. The impact of years of daily antisocial behaviour is detrimental to other tenants' lives and well-being.

Action

Residents asked for a report on what immediate steps will be taken to resolve the issue at Nettleton and Dudeney Lodge. Residents are not satisfied with the council's response and lack of action with regards to tackling the issues of anti-social behaviour

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in blocks of flats: the council have a responsibility to all council tenants to keep them safe. Residents ask for a report on the steps the council is actively taking to:

- Tackling anti-social behaviour in council properties in the city;
- Improving allocations policies so that both the needs of the new tenant and existing tenants are taken into consideration;
- Improving tenancy support, including provision of support to vulnerable people;
- Better supporting residents moving from temporary accommodation into settled accommodation;
- Ensuring perpetrators of anti-social behaviour receive support, and are able to sustain tenancy without their behaviour impacting on others.

Response

As discussed in the last Area Panel the points raised are being considered as part of the Anti-Social Behaviour Review. This review is currently underway. In the last Area Panel response we set out how we are seeking to further enhance tenancy support, including consideration of provision of support to the most vulnerable tenants. This will include the transitional support residents receive when moving from temporary into settled housing. We have also significantly increased the provision of Housing First and Housing Led Support accommodation.

We currently have ten cases of ASB open at Nettleton and Dudeney. Immediate steps being taken include referrals for extra support for people who need to modify their behaviour and assigning each a dedicated Housing Officer to respond to the reported issues. The Housing Officers are proactive in engaging with the alleged perpetrators of ASB. There is an additional complicating factor in that there are currently a few properties within Nettleton that are void and the void works are also creating a noise nuisance which we believe are linked to at least one of these reports.

We hope residents continue to work with officers to respond to the issues arising and thank you those participating in the antisocial behaviour policy review.

North Area

3 Stars

Repairs

Background

Residents are having to wait a long time for repairs to get done, and the Council has reported that this is because there is a backlog due to Covid.

Action

Residents would like to know why there is still a backlog to deal with both urgent and routine repairs, and asks to know what the Council is doing to resolve this problem.

Response

The insourcing of the Housing Repairs & Maintenance service was completed on 1 April 2020 during the first national Covid lockdown. The service transferred with

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approximately 1500 repairs in progress. 132 Mears staff transferred to the council as part of the new Housing Repairs & Maintenance Service. This was fewer staff than anticipated would join the council.

In line with Government Covid-19 pandemic guidance during the first lockdown, the Housing Repairs & Maintenance service was only carrying out essential repairs to council housing, health and safety maintenance checks, and repairs to empty properties where possible until July 2020. During this period, repairs were still being reported and booked but due to Covid restrictions only essential works actioned. This created a backlog of routine repairs across most trades and was first reported to Housing Committee on 16 September 2020. From July 2020 the definition of essential repairs was expanded for all trade teams to include repairs that, if left unattended in the long term, would have an impact on the residents and on properties. Examples were heating and hot water repairs, containable leaks, and condensation wash downs. However, Covid 19 provisions continued to apply.

In addition, some residents were reluctant to have operatives in their homes to address non-essential repairs during the pandemic. The pandemic also had a significant impact on the service staffing resources with operatives and office staff being off work as a result of positive Covid tests received by them or a member of their household or shielding because they or a family member were in a Covid vulnerable category. The Service is seeking to clear the backlog and are currently recruiting trade operatives and office-based staff to expand capacity to complete more repairs. We have estimated it will take 12 months to clear the backlog.

North and West Area

3 Stars

Communications between Council and residents

Background

North: Residents feel that the level of communication between the Council and residents is unsatisfactory:

- There is no follow-up by Council officers with resident reps after Area Panel meetings.
- Residents are not being informed in a timely fashion of changes that affect them: for example, the Repairs system, the Estate Development Budget process

West: Why is there a lack of communication? Officers very difficult to get in touch with. Phone calls go unanswered and messages/emails ignored. This is especially the case for EDB and Task and Finish groups.

Action

North: Residents would like to see an improvement in how the Council communicates with them. They would like:

- Council officers to follow up on their actions after Area Panel meetings and contact reps with updates.

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- To be consulted and kept informed in a timely fashion of any changes to Council Housing services that affect them.

West: What is the solution?

Response

Thank you for raising the matter of communications, and I am very sorry that tenant representatives have found some areas of communications between themselves and the Council to be unsatisfactory, and that some calls have not been returned. Your request to for us to follow up on actions discussed at Area Panels and provide you with updates is perfectly reasonable, and we will make immediate improvements on this as well as addressing it as part of the Area Panel Review.

In the fullness of time, our ambition will be that any answers to questions raised at Area Panel, whether via resident's questions or during the meeting will be posted on the resident pages on the council's website.

This will enable any interested residents to easily see issues being raised on their behalf and the responses to them. Naturally, this can be extended to matters raised in other meeting – e.g. Task & Finish Groups. This will also be taken forward as part of the review of Area Panels.

With regard to consulting with you and keeping you updated on matters, again please accept my apologies if information is coming to you late. Where there are changes to areas of our service that we need to communicate, we will make sure that you receive a bulletin so that you are all updated.

Please do get in touch with the Community Engagement Team with any specific information you expected, as it's helpful for staff to understand where the communications failure has occurred and how it could be prevented in future.

North Area

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Estate Development Budget

Background

There is a general lack of information and clarity around the Estate Development Budget forms, bids and overall process. There is only a 2020-21 EDB quick bid form available to download on the Council website. Residents have been told that this is out of date and is no longer valid. There are no other available downloadable forms. Residents have been told they have to fill these out online. The EDB task and finish group were told there would be simplified EDB forms, but have not yet been sent or seen these yet.

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Action

Residents would like to know why the new 2021-22 Quick Bid forms are not available to download on the Council website yet, and when it will be available. Residents would like to see the new, simplified EDB forms. Residents would like to point out that not everyone has access to, or can easily fill out online forms, and would like EDB forms to be made more accessible.

Response

The council website sets out the process for EDB applications, including step by step pages taking residents through the process. It also includes a link to the downloadable form and contact details – email and telephone number for support. Estate Development Budget (brighton-hove.gov.uk)

Apologies that this year's downloadable forms were not available, this is now resolved. We continue to explore the use of an on-line form similar to many council and grant funding processes and remain mindful of ensuring accessibility in its development. We will update residents when one is available to use via the EDB pages on the council's website.

The EDB Task and Finish group reviewed the existing EDB forms in August and suggested changes to simplify the form to make it more accessible for applicants. The draft simplified version is to be discussed and agreed by the Task and Finish Group in the new year and forwarded to Area Panel for approval as soon as possible thereafter. If the Area Panels approve its use, it will be widely shared on the council web pages and with Resident Groups.

As always support through the EDB process is available from the Community Engagement Officer (CEO) for the relevant area and the EDB officer Lucy - Lucy.beasley@brighton-hove.gov.uk

To clarify the EDB bid form can be either filled in via downloading the form (Forms and guidance document for estate development budget bids (brighton-hove.gov.uk)) from the website or by requesting a paper copy from the Community Engagement Team. This can be through the CEO, EDB Officer or the Team's inbox community.engagement@brighton-hove.gov.uk.

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West Area

3 Stars

Service improvement groups

Background

The is confusion about the different service improvement groups.

Action

Please provide clarification on when the four service improvement groups merged into two and copies of the minutes.

Response

The Tenant and Leaseholder Engagement Strategy approved at Housing Committee March 2021 includes a recommendation to reduce the four Service Improvement Groups to two, minutes of that meeting can be found on the council's website (<https://present.brighton-hove.gov.uk/documents/g10054/Printed%20minutes%2017th-March-2021%2016.00%20Housing%20Committee.pdf?T=1>).

These groups will focus on 'People' and 'Buildings'. This will allow for time limited task and finish groups to focus on specific issues in detail and report back to Area Panels. Discussions have begun in the Home and Involvement & Empowerment Service Improvement Groups on a Terms Of Reference for the two new groups. Further discussion is required and the intention is to bring the draft Terms Of Reference for these groups to the Area Panels in the Spring 2022 for approval.

