

Scrutiny Homes Sub-Committee

Meeting held on Monday, 29 January 2024 at 6.30 pm in Council Chamber, Town Hall, Katharine Street, Croydon CR0 1NX

MINUTES

- Present:** Councillor Leila Ben-Hassel (Chair);
Councillor Adele Benson (Vice-Chair);
Councillors Kola Agboola, Claire Bonham, Danielle Denton and
Ellily Ponnuthurai
- Also Present:** Councillor Lynne Hale and Chrisdni Reshekaron and Rowenna Davis (joined online)
- Apologies:** Councillor Sue Bennett (joined online)

PART A

28/24 Minutes of the Previous Meeting

The minutes of the meeting held on 23 October 2023 were agreed as an accurate record, considering the clarifications proposed by the Chair.

29/24 Disclosures of Interest

There were no disclosures of interest made at the meeting.

30/24 Urgent Business (if any)

There was no urgent business for the consideration of the Homes Sub-Committee at this meeting.

31/24 Update on the Housing Revenue Account and Housing General Fund Budgets 2024-25

The Sub-Committee considered a report set out on pages 17 to 33 of the agenda, which provided the Housing Revenue Account and Housing General Fund budgets for the years 2024-25.

The item was introduced by Cllr Lynne Hale, the Cabinet Member for Housing, and the officers. It was highlighted that the Cabinet would be requested to approve a 7.7% increase to social tenant rent and tenant service

charges. Reassurance was given that the proposed increase had been discussed at the Tenant and Leaseholder Panel, and while its members understood the rationale behind the request, they had stressed that they would like to see the improvements as soon as possible.

- Councillor Lynne Hale – Cabinet Member for Housing
- Susmita Sen – Corporate Director of Housing
- Sue Hanlon – Director of Assets
- Orlagh Guarnori – Finance Manager
- Sarah Attwood – Finance Manager

During the introduction, it was noted that: -

- It was highlighted that the forecasted overspend in the 2023-24 budget had been well managed and was necessary to address the repair backlog.
- The 2024-25 budget would be informed by the four priorities identified in the survey responses from November 2023.
- It was highlighted that the budget would be reviewed in July when there would be more information arising from the stock condition survey.
- The stock condition survey findings would also be used to inform Croydon's Asset Management Strategy that was due to go to Cabinet this summer.

Following the introduction the Sub-Committee proceeded to question the information provided in the report, initially focusing on the Period 7 update. The first question asked for further information on the number of voids existing in Croydon and the number of completions. The officer explained that the Council expected to complete 700 voids during this financial year, and by the end of December, had completed 641. It was also added that the high number of voids was caused by the considerable backlog.

The following question asked about the £3.4m overspending on disrepair, legal and settlement costs, and how the Council planned to mitigate these costs in the future. It was explained that this was an overspend against the budgeted figure. It was stressed that the focus going forward would be on prevention, including ensuring repairs were completed correctly which was closely connected with the cultural change workstreams. Regarding compensation and disrepair costs, it was explained that the data was being validated, but there were around 5550 disrepair cases, which had been taken account of in the budget setting process.

In response to a question about the timeframe for clearing the backlog of legacy repairs and voids, it was advised that the Council was committed to completing the legacy repairs and voids within 18 months.

The Sub-Committee asked a question about the savings included in last year's budget across the directorate, particularly what the savings targets were and what savings were achieved. It was explained by the officers that the HRA had not had savings targets for the last couple of years, due to the rent increases and general fund savings targets. It was added that the main savings achieved were from the service restructure and vacancy factor within the general fund budget. In addition to that, there were various savings aimed at reducing the number of households in expensive emergency accommodation through occupancy checks and eligibility checks. Progress had been made on this work, and it was anticipated that savings would be delivered by period 12.

A supplementary question was asked about the proportion of savings resulting from members of staff not being in post and the proportion achieved as a result of better and more efficient ways of working. The officers explained that the Housing directorate was close to being fully staffed, and many agency workers had been replaced by permanent staff. It was estimated by the officers that around one-third of the savings achieved were due to vacancies, and around two-thirds were due to efficiencies and better methods of working.

The Sub-Committee moved onto questions about the HRA budget, with the first question asking whether the officers felt the budget was correct in terms of meeting current need and future pressures arising from recent legislation relating to damp and mould. The officers explained that the next year's budget was based on the data from this year. It was added that the department would be provided with more damp and mould-related training. This should allow officers to have a more proactive approach towards the early detection of damp and mould.

The next question asked what the Council had been doing to prevent disrepair costs, legal fees, and settlements. The officers explained that as the damp and mould team played a considerable role in this area, it had been decided that the team would remain in Croydon on a permanent basis. It was highlighted again the importance of the damp and mould training.

Subsequently, the Sub-Committee asked for an update on the private sector housing team moving to the Housing directorate. The officers explained that before that happened, the Housing directorate had needed to fill some vacancies and increase the capacity. However, the team would be managed using a joined-up approach.

The Sub-Committee moved on to the budget challenge part of the report. The first question asked about using funds raised through the right to buy scheme to acquire twenty properties. The officers explained that this proposal was at an early stage of development, with other funding options also being explored, including grants. Reassurance was given that the Council would carefully consider how any new housing would meet residents' needs in the best way possible. It was also added that the Council was in a fortunate position as there were many homes, including former Council homes, available on the market. The officers also reassured the Sub-Committee that they could acquire at least 20 homes in the current financial year. The officers also added that there was a Greater London Authority (GLA) funding opportunity which would potentially allow the Council to acquire more properties.

The Sub-Committee questioned whether there was a clear link between the Housing Strategy and both General Fund and HRA budgets. The officers explained that there had been a much greater focus on using data to inform decision making, with putting the building blocks in place for this being a priority. This could be evidenced through the stock condition surveys, which would allow the Council to identify where it needed to invest in its stock, resulting in a more accurate budget. It was advised that once the HRA budget had been reprofiled, it would be shared with the Sub-Committee. It was also added by the officers that another driver in the budget development was regulatory changes and requirements. It was highlighted that when the budget had been developed, it had been informed by feedback from residents, and the budget was built according to the identified priorities. A supplementary question asked about the budget for tackling anti-social behaviour. The officers explained that the Council had increased the budget for estates and caretaking.

The next question asked whether the budget was sufficient to support work on tackling domestic violence and abuse. The officers explained that this budget was managed by the Violence Reduction Network through a service-level agreement. It was highlighted by the officers that they wanted to focus on increasing efficiency, and officers stressed that they had confidence in this budget.

Concern was raised by the Sub-Committee that many residents were reluctant to contact the housing officers and as a result a question was asked about the possibility of having community safety officers directly serving Council tenants. Officers advised that this was one of the priorities that residents had highlighted. It was explained that there were plans to review officers' remits to clearly define the role of housing officers in tackling domestic violence and anti-social behaviour. Currently, the community safety

team would only work on the most challenging and complex cases. Thus, it was essential to determine where accountability laid and what were the appropriate thresholds.

The next question asked when the Council was anticipating the level of housing repair costs would start to reduce. The officers explained that there had been a considerable spike in repair cases following the change to new contractors and bringing the contact centre in-house. Therefore, the budget was built based on the worst-case scenario. However, it would be very hard to determine at the present time when these costs would plateau.

Further information was requested on the architectural changes to Regina Road development and the associated costs, including any inflationary increases. The officers acknowledged that accounting for inflation had been challenging. However, the HRA budget had been stress tested with external support provided by Savills. The inflationary allowance for the forthcoming financial year had been increased with the worst-case scenario assumed for the current and the following years. It was highlighted by the officers that the budget for Regina Road had been increased accordingly. It was added by the officers that prudent assumptions had been made about potential funding for the project from the Greater London Authority, as they were awaiting the outcome of the bid. The officers explained that the procurement process for the project was ongoing and until it was completed, it would be challenging to provide an accurate timeline for the regeneration.

An explanation was request on the building safety work budgetary increase from £8.6 million in 2024-25 to £42 million in 2025-26. Officers explained that this increase was related to the anticipated completion of the stock survey data. The results of the survey could lead to very costly changes, for example the refurbishment or even complete rebuilding of large panel blocks. Thus, a significant budgetary increase was necessary to allow for that. The allocation was further challenged by the Sub-Committee with it explained that the budget had been based on the number of large panel blocks that had not been refurbished in recent years and the number of properties over a certain age. The officers stressed that these assumptions were high-level ones and could change significantly once the results from the stock condition surveys had been received.

Then the Sub-Committee moved on to the General Fund side of the Budget. The first question asked about the Housing Association Coordination role and transferring it to the Housing Directorate. The officers confirmed that the role was being transferred to housing, with discussions in progress. It was highlighted that the Housing Strategy committed the Council to improving its

work with housing associations, and officers had already held a first meeting with stakeholders.

As a follow-up, it was questioned where the Council was in terms of its work with housing associations and whether a truly collaborative approach could be implemented. The officers highlighted that the Council was in the early stages of developing a project involving several of the Council's largest social housing suppliers.

In response to a question about transformation, it was explained that the transformational items included in the capital budget were still being developed and only high-level information was available at this stage. The officers added that most of the transformation budget was spread over 2023-24 and 2024-25. Hence, the figures were reflected in both years.

The Sub-Committee challenged the pace of savings, to which officers explained that delivery was planned over several years. Therefore, there was still an expectation that savings would be realised. It was further explained by the officers that the current focuses were on demand management and supporting residents in temporary accommodation. For instance, there was a focus on working with residents at an earlier stage to try to avoid eviction, hence reducing the need for emergency and temporary accommodation. Although this work was starting to deliver improvement, officers acknowledged that some of the work had not been delivered at the expected pace. For instance, the Council had a target of seeing 90% of residents at high risk of homelessness within seven to 14 days, and at present this was not being achieved with the current waiting time being approximately one to two months.

The Council was in the process of acquiring a dynamic purchasing system for emergency and temporary accommodation that would hopefully deliver cost savings, with discussions underway with existing suppliers about moving to this system. It was explained by officers that the dynamic purchasing system provided two main functions: (i) the framework for procurement; and (ii) contract management.

It was highlighted by officers that the temporary accommodation transformation was not only about reducing the cost to the Council but also about improving engagement with residents. Hence, the Council had been scheduling surgeries in temporary accommodation where residents were placed. However, at the same time, the officers acknowledged that budgetary challenges arising from wider economic conditions nationally had increased costs considerably. Although it was likely the cost pressures would remain for the foreseeable future, there were some initial signs of improvement in the

economy and increased support from the central government following the Autumn Statement. For instance, increasing the local housing allowance to the 30th percentile was anticipated to increase the amount of affordable housing.

It was questioned whether there could be any confidence in the achievability of the saving of £653,000 for 2024-25, and whether the pressures would carry on into 2025-26. It was explained by officers that the saving was based on the assumption of reducing around 250 temporary accommodations, with assurance given that this was achievable. It was highlighted that 100 temporary accommodations had already been reduced. It was stressed by the officers that savings were very much aligned with the cultural transformation that needed to happen in the Housing Directorate and developing different ways of working.

It was questioned whether occupancy checks were being prioritised, including the possibility of bringing in external resources to complete this work. Officers explained that transformation funding had been allocated to provide for additional resource, with significant progress made leading to 60% of the occupancy checks being completed. It was confirmed that around 70% of the checks had verified the occupancy.

Further information was requested on the length of time people spent in temporary accommodation. The officers explained that the average temporary accommodation placement was predominantly driven by the supply and availability of affordable accommodation. The average stay varied from year to year; for example, for one bedroom accommodation, it could be from one year to seven years. It was further explained that the term temporary accommodation refers to statutory legislation and set criteria rather than the length of time. As a follow-up, it was questioned whether there was any guarantee that a person in temporary accommodation would eventually be moved to permanent accommodation. The officers explained that this was not guaranteed, and it was highlighted that the application process and criteria for temporary accommodation was separate to the process for social housing.

It was questioned what the occupancy check process included. Officers explained that occupancy checks included not only checking whether the property was occupied by the renters but also the housing conditions and any amendments made to the property. This information was then updated in the Council's housing system accordingly. The next step was to collect the data about the number of people placed in temporary accommodation where the living conditions were not suitable. This would then inform the development of a plan for how these residents could be moved to more suitable alternative

temporary accommodation. The officers explained that it was also a matter of sustainability and moving families out of commercial hotels.

A supplementary question asked by the Sub-Committee considered whether the budgeted amount would be sufficient to cover the cost of moving residents out of inappropriate conditions. Reassurance was given by officers that the budget has been based on an assumption of increased demand, which would be reviewed once the more detailed work had been completed.

It was questioned whether the Council had any plans to acquire new property to use for temporary accommodation. Officers explained that currently, the government had introduced a cap on the number of properties that could be bought using right-to-buy receipts, which was capped at 20. However, the Council had been looking into other opportunities, for instance, using GLA funding.

There was concern raised by the Sub-Committee about the use of hotel placements and particularly the problems residents experienced when the Council did not pay or extend the rental. It was questioned whether the Council could obtain a corporate account allowing to book stays longer than seven days. Officers advised that the Council had been trying to set-up a corporate account with Travelodge who was their largest supplier. Although the Council had initially been refused a corporate account based on the due diligence performed by the supplier, the conversation was ongoing about how the Council could meet the minimum criteria for an account. Officers also advised that they were looking to minimise the use of commercial hotels. There was a dedicated procurement team set up to work with landlords, but it was acknowledged that using purchase cards to pay for the accommodation could be problematic, as it would only allow for paying for short stays. However, the payment process had improved as the number of residents placed in the commercial hotels decreased.

As a follow-up, it was questioned why the Council had been refused a corporate account. Officers explained that it was not uncommon for local authorities to be refused a corporate account, but this option would continue to be explored. It was also stressed by the officers that using commercial hotels was not desired and would be minimised.

A question was asked about what proportion of the emergency accommodation budget was spent on commercial hotel costs and on different types of emergency accommodation. The officers explained that in the Council's portfolio, there were longer-term leases and spot purchase accommodations. The Council had agreements with about 50 to 60 local landlords who provided a spot purchase accommodation. It this type of

accommodation was not available then the Council usually looked at the commercial housing sector. The officers added that to avoid using the commercial housing accommodation, they had been working on introducing the previously mentioned dynamic purchasing system. This framework provided information on the availability of all agents and landlords that the Council worked with.

It was suggested by the Sub-Committee that there may be some residents who could afford private housing, but to do so they would require a guarantor and as such had the Council considered becoming a guarantor. Officers explained that councils tended to be guarantors for care leavers. Therefore, there had been discussions about expanding this role. However, taking on the role of guarantor for a large number of residents would become unaffordable very quickly. The officers explained that they actively continued to work with private landlords on potential options such as paying rent in advance and rent deposits.

The Sub-Committee challenged whether the Council acting as guarantor could be used for a specific group of residents, as supporting them to access private sector housing would generate considerable savings for the Council. Officers explained that this option could be considered, but it would be unlikely for the Council to sustain such a scheme.

It was asked whether the Council offered top-ups for residents who could almost meet a private landlord's criteria. The officers explained that the Council offered this kind of support, for instance, when lack of support would result in eviction residents could discuss these types of opportunities with the housing officers. It was acknowledged by officers that the communication around these opportunities required more work.

The final question asked whether capital investment could be used to ensure more effective use of properties, for instance, through building an extension. The officers explained that there was a Regeneration Board in the Council. The Board worked within the assigned regeneration budget, and one of its objectives was to maximise the efficiency of available properties. It was explained that this could involve building extensions and loft conversions.

At the conclusions of this item, the Chair thanked the officers for all their hard work in developing the budget and their engagement with the questions of the Sub-Committee.

Actions

Following the discussion of this item, the Sub-Committee agreed the following actions to follow-up after the meeting.

1. It was agreed that an updated staffing structure for the Housing service to be circulated to the Sub-Committee, as requested at the previous meeting.
2. It was agreed that confirmation of the 'go live' date for the dynamic purchasing system for emergency and temporary accommodation would be confirmed to the Sub-Committee once known.
3. The Sub-Committee requested a written update on the progress made with Sycamore House.
4. The Sub-Committee requested clarification of the number of families placed in commercial hotels and hostel for both emergency and temporary accommodation.
5. In relation to the service transformation agenda to move towards a more proactive, prevention-based service, further information about how the Housing Service promoted its 'open-door' policy for people in housing need, was requested.

Conclusions

Following its discussion of this item, the Sub-Committee reached the following conclusions on the information provided: -

1. The Sub-Committee recognised that a lot of different work streams were being managed simultaneously within the Housing service and that it was a credit to the team that noticeable improvement towards stabilising the service and building solid governance processes had been established.
2. The Sub-Committee was concerned that much of the data gathered had still to be analysed and concluded that this represented a key risk to the delivery of the budget, particularly the results from the stock condition surveys which could have a major impact on both the level of repairs needed and the longer-term capital investment required.
3. However, the Sub-Committee was reasonably reassured that the Housing service had worked as well as it could with the data already available, which had resulted in the budget for repairs and maintenance being rightsized.
4. The Sub-Committee concluded that Housing Revenue Account (HRA) Capital Programme was well thought through based upon the information available at this stage, but the real test would come in the summer once further stock condition data was analysed leading to an updated HRA Business Plan, which the Sub-Committee looked forward to reviewing later in the year.
5. The Sub-Committee was also reassured that many of their concerns raised at the meeting were already known to the Housing service and work was underway to address these.
6. While it remained a work in progress, the Sub-Committee welcomed the savings delivered through transformation of the Homelessness

service in 2023-24 and was reassured that these were not solely reliant on staff vacancy savings. However, further evidence was required to demonstrate that this transformation work would result in a transformed service focussed on reducing homelessness through prevention and early intervention.

7. The Sub-Committee noted concern about the potential risks to the General Fund budget associated with the increased demand for the homelessness services and looked forward to reviewing the demand management transformation within the service later in the year.
8. Overall, the Sub-Committee was unable to provide total reassurance on the 2024-25 budget, given the data that would normally be expected to inform the setting of a budget was still being collated and validated. However, it did agree that the Housing Service had a good understanding of the pressures on the service and seemed to have the right priorities in place to drive forward improvement.

32/24 Responsive Repairs Contract Update

The Sub-Committee considered a report set out on pages 35 to 51 of the agenda, which provided an update on repairs performance and procurement process, damp and mould overview and asset management update.

- Councillor Lynne Hale – Cabinet Member for Housing
- Susmita Sen – Corporate Director of Housing
- Orlagh Guarnori – Finance Manager
- Sarah Attwood – Finance Manager
- Beatrice Cingtho-Taylor – Director of Housing, Homelessness Prevention & Accommodation
- Mark Billings – Housing Solutions Transformation Lead

The item was introduced by Cllr Lynne Hale, the Cabinet Member for Housing and the officers. During the introduction the following was noted: -

- Since August 2023, when the three new repair contracts went live, there had been a significant increase in the call volume – around 2000 calls per month, and in the additional repair orders – around 1500 per month.
- Although the procurement was based on the data shared by the previous contractor, there had been a notion that there might have been some repairs suppression.
- There had been issues in the contact centre, mainly in relation to a high level of sickness absence among the temporary staff.

- Although the service was not work as well as it would be desired, due to the significant increase in the number of calls and the contractor's capacity to deliver the higher than anticipated level of service, it was assured that the Council was aware of this and had plans to mitigate the impact. These included a refresh of the contact centre and a new training programme for staff.

Following the introduction, the Sub-Committee asked questions on the information provided. The first question asked for an explanation of the poor performance of the call centre in November 2023. Officers advised that the lower performance was caused predominantly by sicknesses amongst the temporary staff. It was also added that a similar situation occurred on the 2nd of January when a considerable number of staff were unwell. This had an impact on the overall performance for January. It was highlighted that over the next six to eight weeks, considerable changes would be implemented, which were expected to result in shorter wait times, with five minutes targeted by the end of March and four minutes by the end of May.

It was questioned whether, once the recruitment was completed, the staffing levels for the contact centre would be right or whether performance issues caused by staff shortages would be a reoccurring issue. It was explained by the officer that staffing levels had been informed by intelligence gathered over the last six months, so the level of provision should be correct. However, it was stressed that they would target part-time staff to support the team during peak periods. In addition to that, it was mentioned that in most contact centres, there would be a relatively high staff turnover – around 20% to 25% a year. Therefore, it was crucial to account for such a level of turnover in the plans.

The next question asked by the Sub-Committee mentioned the heating repair contractor's performance, particularly its low performance in November 2023, the time limit for emergency and non-emergency repairs and how performance would be managed. It was explained by the officers that the performance data provided by the repairs contractors was going through a validation process to ensure it was inaccurate. It was also explained that the targets were as follows – four hours to attend and 24 hours to complete an emergency repair, and 14 days to complete the non-emergency repairs. The officers acknowledged that they experienced many problems during the first winter period of the new contract which were in part caused by higher levels of demanded repairs than was resourced for in the contract. It was stressed by the officers that additional resources had been employed to address this in the last eight weeks. In addition to that, the Council had been working with the provider to prioritise emergency repairs, rather than following up on other works.

It was further challenged by the Sub-Committee whether this issue was also caused by the lack of stock required for repairs, for instance, boilers. It was explained by the officers that the problem was twofold. Firstly, the issue was around data and what types of stock they had and what parts were required. Secondly, there was a large number of repairs coming through.

The next set of questions asked why the recruitment process for contact centre staff did not start earlier, whether the Council had plans to replace temporary staff members with permanent ones, and what would be the financial implications of doing so. It was explained by the officers that the mobilisation happened with additional temporary staff members, which was caused by the previous contractor providing a list for the contact centre staff late. Therefore, until early July, the officers did not know how many members of staff were going to be transferred to support delivering the contact centre service. Only five people transferred to the new in-house contact centre, when the actual number of staff required was around 22 or 23 full-time employees. The officers explained that the temporary resource came into Croydon towards the end of June. It was also highlighted that in August the new IT system was introduced. The new system and the increased number of calls had required further additional members of staff to be brought in, and new members of staff would join at the end of February and early March.

Subsequently, the Sub-Committee asked a question on additional operatives provided by the contractors. The officers explained that the commercial model set up for the contractors assumed that the Council did not need to pay for operatives. The Council currently had been discussing with contractors how many additional supervisors would be required to manage the additional operatives. It was estimated that around three supervisors would be required.

A supplementary question was asked about performance management and the proportion of permanent to temporary staff currently in place. The officers explained that currently seven out of 23 members of staff were permanent. It was stressed that even though the service was predominantly run by temporary staff, it did not mean that the quality of service provided was particularly low. It was further explained that the performance problems were predominantly caused by an increase in demand, which resulted in longer call handling times than anticipated. It was assured that the culture was not an area of concern for the officers.

The next question considered the residents contacting the Council with an emergency and whether the staff handling calls would have the required information, for instance, on the location of stopcocks. The officers explained that currently, on the NEC system, there was no information about the

location of stopcocks in each property. However, most of the stopcocks were usually located underneath a sink or in a cupboard in a shared area, and this would be included in the script for the staff.

A subsequent question related to the customer satisfaction improvement plan and the timescale for implementation. The officers explained that the improvement process had already started. For instance, the training and induction plan for the contract centre was ongoing, and further training would start at the end of February this year. The officers added that the current focus was on additional training for temporary staff to ensure accurate repair diagnostics. In addition, the Council would like to implement an IT tool repair finder around the beginning of April.

The next question asked about the monitoring of calls and whether there was a distinction between calls related to new issues and follow-up calls. The officers explained that they measured the number of calls coming in by the hour, and they monitored a 'call failure demand'. It was further challenged by the Sub-Committee whether the follow-up calls were added to the notes for existing repairs or whether they were raised as new issues. The officers explained that they recently addressed this issue during a training session and the contact centre advisors were reminded always to ask whether a resident had reported the same repair in the last six months. This checked firstly whether there was an open job and secondly whether the job was attended in the last six months as the recall could be raised with the supplier.

A supplementary question was asked about using IT systems to identify existing jobs more effectively. It was explained by the officers that the supplier was working on the data validation and identifying how many requests were raised multiple times. It was also added by the officers that one of the system's capabilities was 'heat mapping' against each property to see how many jobs had been logged. It was also mentioned that the script asked an officer to check the repair history.

A question was raised about staff welfare and the level of sickness related absence. The officers explained that there had only been a considerably higher level of absence in November and December, which was predominantly caused by higher levels of flu and COVID-19. It was assured by the officers that there was no evidence that these absences were caused by an inappropriate amount of work.

The next question asked whether there was any monitoring of properties with a lack of repairs reported by residents. The officers explained that the Council had been working on tenancy inspections to identify potential fraud and

subletting. It was also mentioned by the officers that heat mapping could be used to identify the lack of repairs and target these properties for inspection.

The next question asked about the key performance indicators (KPIs) set for the contractors and contractual penalties based on them. The officers explained that the validation process needed to be completed before the KPIs could be accurately assessed. Subsequently, the officers would work closely with the contractors to determine improvement areas and develop an appropriate plan. It was also highlighted by the officers that it was important to give the contractors very clear guidance regarding the minimum standards expected.

Subsequently, the Sub-Committee asked whether it would be possible for the residents to monitor the repair status in real-time. It was explained by the officers that this option was not currently available. However, the possibility of adding more information to the portal was being explored, including the ability to request appointments through the portal. This capability should be added between April and June this year, and before it was added it would be piloted on a selected group of residents.

The next question asked whether there was a log of informal complaints, as residents tended to be reluctant to make formal complaints, and if there was, whether there were any common themes. The officers explained that they referred to these informal complaints as issues, and tried to capture and record these either through the contact centre or through other officers who were in contact with residents.

Further information was requested on the timescale for turning legacy voids into good conditions. The officers explained that the target time was 12 days. However, at the end of December, performance averaged between 14 to 18 days. It was explained that there were some differences between how voids were measured in Croydon and other local authorities, especially around what is classified as a lettable void and major works void. It was also added that Croydon measured minor and major void similarly, which was an area officers would like to improve. A follow-up questioned the impact of Croylease on the void turnaround. The officers explained that the contractors undertook work on Croylease properties; however, it was not a focus for them over the last six months. It was also added that the main work in Croylease voids had been delivered by subcontractors.

The next set of questions related to the priority gas and heating service for vulnerable residents particularly whether vulnerable residents were prioritised in Croydon, how the effectiveness of the service was measured, how the Council planned to improve the gas service and whether other options would

be considered if the lower performance continued. Officers explained that the NEC system stored data around vulnerabilities if they were provided by the residents. It was also added that contact centre staff asked the residents whether they believed themselves to be vulnerable, which led to further questions around their level of need. It was highlighted that most heating-related repairs between October and April would be classified as emergency repairs. The officers assured the Sub-Committee that when there were issues around emergency repairs, the supplier brought in additional resources, including apprentices and subcontractors. It was also highlighted that the officers expected the service to improve within the next three months.

A supplementary question asked about the reasons why the contractor did not have sufficient resources. The officers explained that the mobilisation period was shorter for one of the suppliers because the original contractor who had been awarded the contract pulled out. In addition, around the same time the Council had to focus on the delivery of a significant number of the landlord's gas safety checks.

Further information was requested on the number of gas safety checks completed. Officers provided reassurance that performance had been improving, and the compliance level was around 99%. It was mentioned that last week, there were around 380 outstanding checks. However, around 30 checks a day were being performed, including force entry. It was also explained that the officers already had planned and scheduled checks that would be due in February and March. The officers provided assured that they were planning to be as close to 100% as possible by the end of the financial year (31st of March).

The next set of questions related to doable repairs including the considerable backlog in this area and whether the Council was trying to work with other contractors to take over some cases. The officers explained that the data indicating poor performance was being validated. Therefore, it could change materially. The officers suggested that currently, there was no need to bring in other contractors as KNT demonstrated a very clear resourcing and improvement plan. A supplementary question asked whether the other contractors would have sufficient resources to step in to support each other if needed. It was advised that this could not be confirm at this time and would only be explored if necessary.

The next question asked by the Sub-Committee considered the trends and progress on the stock survey. The officers explained that the trends could not be confirmed with certainty as the information was still being uploading into the APEC system. It was mentioned that by the end of December 33% of stock condition survey had been completed, and 40% completion was

targeted by the end of March. The officers also reassured the Sub-Committee that a significant amount of work was being undertaken by the contractor to improve the access. It was also mentioned that the forced entry necessary for gas checks allowed the Council to use the opportunity to undertake stock condition surveys.

At the conclusion of this item the Chair thanked the officer for their engagement with the questions of the Sub-Committee.

Actions

Following the discussion of this item, the Sub-Committee agreed the following actions to follow-up after the meeting.

1. In response to a query about updating Energy Performance Certificates, it was agreed that further information would be provided on the number of recently reviewed Energy Performance Certificates on Council owned housing.
2. It was agreed that areas such as call centre staff performance management, ensuring the collection of all relevant data relating to repairs and updating residents on the status of their repairs would be reviewed by the Sub-Committee when it looked at the cultural transformation work (including customer experience) within the Housing service at its next meeting on 16 April 2024.

Conclusions

Following its discussion of this item, the Sub-Committee reached the following conclusions on the information provided: -

9. The Sub-Committee commended the team for the significant amount of work that has been delivered in a short space of time since the mobilisation of the new responsive repairs and heating contracts, particularly in the context of a larger than anticipated backlog of historic repairs.
10. The Sub-Committee agreed that data would be a key driver in the delivery of service improvement. As the service was going through the process of validating the data it was collecting, the Sub-Committee agreed that there were areas, such as those related to contractor performance, that would need to be revisited once this process had been completed.
11. The Sub-Committee identified that capacity remained a key issue for the service and accepted that it would be an ongoing challenge to plan staffing resource for the contract centre and require a higher number of temporary staff to manage demand, until there was greater degree of certainty about the ongoing volume of repairs.
12. The Sub-Committee welcomed confirmation that the number of gas safety checks completed had significantly improved, although it

agreed to continue to monitor performance in this area while it remained below the key performance indicator target.

Recommendations

Following its discussion of this item the Sub-Committee agreed to submit the following recommendations for the consideration of the Executive Mayor -

1. The Homes Sub-Committee recommends that the Council’s reporting on void turnaround times is brought into line with other local authorities and rather than using one overall figure for all voids, these are split to differentiate between the turnaround time for lettable voids and major voids.
2. The Homes Sub-Committee recommends that as part of the work to heat map repairs, that any homes with no repairs recorded for a significant period are also reviewed to understand why this may be the case, to ensure there are no unreported repairs that may cause more serious property damage if left unaddressed.

33/24 Cabinet Response to Scrutiny Recommendations

The Sub-Committee noted the report.

34/24 Work Programme 2023/24

The Sub-Committee noted the report.

The meeting ended at 9.45 pm

Signed:

Date:

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