

HOUSING & SOCIAL CARE SCRUTINY PANEL

Minutes of the meeting of the Housing & Social Care Scrutiny Panel held remotely on Friday 4 March 2022 at 10 am

Present

Councillor Cal Corkery (in the Chair)
Stuart Brown
Lynda Symes

Colin Gallagher - Abri
Ralph Facey - Abri

Andrew Godwin - Guinness
Richard King - Guinness

Adele Lees - Sanctuary

Steve Groves - Head of Building Maintenance
Meredydd Hughes - Assistant Director, Buildings

1. Apologies (AI 1)

There were no apologies for absence.

2. Declarations of Members' Interests (AI 2)

Councillor Corkery declared a personal interest as he is a Portsmouth City Council (PCC) tenant.

3. Minutes of the previous meeting held on 25 November 2022 (AI 3)

RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting held on 25 November 2021 be agreed as a correct record.

4. Review into "Procedures and performance of the council and housing associations in relation to response repairs and maintenance" (AI 4)

Councillor Corkery welcomed those present and gave a brief introduction to the role of the scrutiny panel and the background to the review. The aim of the review is to hear about good feedback as well as problems so as to share good practice and drive up standards to provide a consistent and good quality service. Each organisation gave an introduction to their repairs service.

Ralph Facey, Executive Director of Operations, said Abri has 972 homes in Portsmouth, mostly in blocks in the areas covered by PCC. The last year has been the most challenging but there has been good news in the last quarter with the recruitment strategy. 2,042 repairs (72% routine) were completed in the last six months at a cost of £262,000. The average response time is 36 days which is not desirable but it is improving. Colin Gallagher, Commercial Director, said about 80% repairs are done by Abri's own trades(people) and are only outsourced where there are recruitment issues. There are about 12 trades in Portsmouth, including supervisors and two gas engineers, but

additional ones can be added if necessary. Brexit, fuel costs, furlough and damage caused by Storm Eunice (fences, roofs) and a high staff turnover all cause problems. However, an additional 100 resources have been recruited in the south over the last six to seven months. Abri have improved processes as to how they deal with damp and mould. They have started a stock condition survey in the Portsmouth area which in the next few months will inform the investment profile. Planned maintenance reduces the need for response repairs.

Andrew Godwin, Head of Service for the south coast, echoed Abri's comments about the difficulties of the last 18 months to two years. They employ around 500 trades across the country and are looking at employing 20% more but it is a very tough market at the moment. Guinness are over-recruiting because of issues with performance and cost of sub-contractors. Guinness used to be able to state terms but rates are increasing and sub-contractors are changing jobs for higher rates.

The majority of response repairs are delivered directly and Guinness will continue to do this. They are considering giving more responsibility to service managers (who have more contact with customers) who see what can be done to reduce multiple visits. There will also be a dedicated disrepair team so disrepair is actioned quickly. Delays and decisions on which repairs to priorities during Covid have created a backlog (a "bow wave") so Guinness have been catching up over the last six to nine months and are still catching up. Recruitment of new staff is a challenge as trades are jumping from organisation to organisation so Guinness have re-aligned their rates. Key to service delivery is "boots on the ground." Rates are rising exponentially so Guinness' costs have increased. End to end times for repairs are currently 26.4 days. There are about 108 jobs outstanding. On average customer satisfaction is 82% and is expected to increase dramatically. Guinness is working on speeding up response times but it is a very challenging environment and Guinness has to move quickly so customers do not pay the price.

Adele Lees, Area Manager for Housing for the South West, said Sanctuary has 129 properties in Portsmouth and had similar issues to Abri and Guinness. Routine repairs are done in 23.7 days and within 24 hours (23.4 hours average in last 12 months) for emergencies. There are 62 open repairs of which 18 are overdue. A damp and mould team was established in October 2021 and has been successful so far. Satisfaction statistics for the South West show a satisfaction rate of 95.9% with staff. 91% residents felt they were treated as valued customers. Before Covid 95% repairs were done in-house but now external contractors are used more.

Steve Groves, Head of Building Maintenance, said the council did not have categories for completions but made appointments when it was convenient to residents which is a probably a unique practice in the area. The council uses three contractors - one for Portsea Island, one for off-island (PCC owns properties in the Havant Borough Council area) and one for gas. Contractors use the NEC3 term service contract using the reimbursable "open book" option. The council uses a range of measures rather than Key Performance

Indicators. End to end times for repairs are about 25 days. Customer satisfaction is measured by a score out of ten and the majority of scores are 9/10. The council looks at how it captures customer satisfaction and where the focus should be, including positive aspects; booking appointments is very positive. It looks at how it engages with residents and how it keeps them informed, especially when there are extensive repairs or moves into new properties.

The same service was delivered during Covid though some repairs took longer due to difficulties accessing properties. The biggest challenge is the difficulty of recruitment and retention of staff as the market is very competitive. The workforce used to be very stable but contractors are losing staff they thought they would never lose, particularly in the last six months. Meredydd Hughes, Assistant Director of Buildings, has been in housing for many years and has never known the industry in the situation it is now. Pressures are Brexit, Covid, fuel prices, shortages of labour and materials and now the situation in the Ukraine.

Housing associations and PCC explained their procedures if residents are not happy with the speed and quality of repairs. They also explained how residents had a voice, something which has become more important since the Grenfell Tower tragedy in 2017.

Colin Gallagher said the aim is to resolve problems by improving the first point of contact before they reach the complaints stage. Call agents are empowered to investigate issues and prioritise repairs; they have access to the diary management system for trades. If the repair cannot be done in-house external trades will be used. If residents are still not happy then they can go through the complaints stage. There is constant dialogue with residents to minimise disruption. Ralph Facey said Abri have launched a community investment strategy around employment, empowerment and wellbeing with activities around Landport and Southsea. Teams will be developing local panels to listen better and a resident scrutiny panel will look at outcomes. Customers can also express their views via webchats. Abri is launching a new housing services strategy in mid-March.

Andrew Godwin said Guinness' complaints procedure was similar to that of Abri. Guinness do a lot of transactional surveys to see if there are any outstanding issues or to see if the service provided was not as expected. The number of service managers is being increased as they have more contact with customers. The longer and more complicated repairs is where there is failure to keep customers up-to-date. Much feedback is about communication on longer jobs so that is Guinness' focus in the next three months. Residents will get a call from an operational support or a service manager as to what could have been done better. Residents' groups are based around blocks or higher density units so there is a need to focus on more scattered units.

Adele Lees said Sanctuary had a very similar formal complaints process to Abri and Guinness. There is frontline resolution for the housing and repairs services. If a customer is not happy Sanctuary will work with them to see what they can do to help. There is also a formal complaints service. Sanctuary has

very specific teams within the repairs team who prioritise calls, for example, the Wellbeing Team ensures repairs for vulnerable customers are on track, and the Incident Team deals with matters like a broken lift in a block. There is a national residents' scrutiny panel so residents can get involved in decision making at all levels. However, arrangements will change in the light of the White Paper.

Steve Groves said the council also hoped complaints did not reach the formal stage. Housing analyses demand to see where the failure and value demand is. The highest failure demand is contractors not turning up. Customer satisfaction surveys are also used. The complaints process has two stages: stage 1 is where one of the management team investigates and stage 2 is undertaken by Mr Groves as Head of Building Maintenance although not many reach stage 2. After stage 2 the next stage is the Housing Ombudsman. The council tries to learn from complaints and see if there are common themes or systematic issues in order to address them. The council is keen to reach as wide a range of residents as possible to get a wide range of feedback. There is the Residents' Consortium and a repairs focus group. Feedback from residents can be by phone or email and not just meetings.

In response to questions from members, Colin Gallagher said repairs can be lengthy and involve repeated visits where they involve other properties, for example, a leak in a ground floor flat means accessing other flats. Feedback is very data driven and is used to identify the top 10% properties where repairs are over and above the normal rate, for instance, a boiler that keeps breaking down or an ongoing leak. Other issues might be identified such in the processes for mutual exchanges or voids. Feedback is a learning process and there are monthly meetings with the repairs team. There might be problems with components such as a particular make of boiler or tap. Guinness acknowledges the frustration caused by lengthy repairs so examines the feedback from call agents in more detail to identify the source of problems.

Andrew Godwin said if a repair fails then Guinness replaces a component or does direct replacement. They do not want to send people out four or five times when it is logical to invest in a replacement. In addition, repeated visits mean other customers wait longer. More control over planned budgeting gives more control over what can be spent. Service managers visit to see why a repair has not worked and can recommend a replacement.

Adele Lees is not in the repairs service but said Sanctuary is building new software, "One Property", which records all the information on one system so when an operative visits a property they can see its history so are empowered to see what is the best action for the customer. For example, if there is a history of repeated repairs to a boiler the operative can see that a replacement is better.

Steve Groves said the process was similar at the council. A member of the management team not involved in the original issue with the repair. Data is key so the council keeps a whole host of data on visits, including for properties where residents do not ask despite needing repairs. The council

carries out targeted stock surveys. The trades are technical people who ask at the time of the visit if any other repairs need doing. Even if trades are doing a routine service they have a responsibility to ask if there other issues.

In view of current recruitment issues, those present thought Councillor Corkery's suggestion of collaborating to upskill the local workforce was good. Ralph Facey said employment and being part of the organisation is a pivotal part of Abri's offer. A recent recruitment fair at a local hotel attracted eight new recruits. Next year Abri are investing resources locally, particularly around EV electricians and retrofitting, as they want people to have a career in housing. 47 apprentice roles are budgeted for. Abri can signpost people to other vacancies if they do not have a particular role. Recruitment costs such as a venue for a jobs event could be shared between organisations.

Andrew Godwin said if there were 100 jobs there would only be about five to ten people to fill them so it is a tough market place. Even during Covid people moved from trades based jobs. Guinness are looking at schools and colleges to "grow their own" and providing apprenticeships.

Steve Groves echoed the comments and said service providers invest heavily in the local area and provide work experience. It is increasingly important for contractors to provide social value. He agreed people need to be recruited at an early stage of their working life. The council "grows" its own chartered building surveyors and now has the strongest team in years. As those present have similar issues perhaps they could work together. Councillor Corkery noted skillsets need to change so that they incorporate new technologies such as retrofitting.

In response to questions from members about supply chain issues Colin Gallagher said Abri had recently carried out a procurement exercise because of rising costs and consolidated their suppliers into three. The benefit of leveraging costs has reduced the cost base and saved up to £1m. Social value, for example, providing apprenticeships, is enhanced as Abri is spending more money with them. A shortage of materials (currently wood because of the storms) has led to a backlog but it is easing now. Materials are more accessible but prices have increased by up to 15 to 20%. Other benefits are that if planned maintenance is done it is cheaper than frequent repairs, for example, replacing a whole window rather than keep repairing it.

Andrew Godwin said the cost increase was 15% across the board but is 9% for this year. Guinness has the same issues as other organisations but it is disappointing to have to compete for the same people.

Adele Lees did not deal directly with suppliers but knew from speaking to customers that there were delays with materials.

Steve Groves said it was a similar situation in the council with increases of 10 to 15% across the board with some massively more in some areas than others. The council examines what the key items of stock are and where they are (warehouses or vans) and how often they are used. Managing materials is more work for the contractors. Meredydd Hughes said there are regular

meetings with the three contractors. Pay is one of the issues discussed as they do not want people leaving. He suggested the council and housing associations meeting collectively to set Portsmouth levels around pay and green issues amongst others, and to share knowledge.

Members mentioned the issues Sanctuary residents had raised at the meeting on 4 February in that they felt there was a breakdown in communication, appointments were cancelled or people did not turn up, and they were not listened to. The review is not the place to discuss individual cases in detail which can be discussed outside today's meeting; however, Adele Lees said she would like the opportunity to look at the concerns in more detail. For example, the case where a tenant had no functioning toilet turned out to be a downstairs toilet and there was one upstairs that worked. As this was during a lockdown it was not considered urgent. Sanctuary said they would do a separate exercise looking at repairs since lockdown.

Councillor Corkery those present for attending and answering members' questions. Repairs affect people's daily lives and everyone should have a decent and safe home to live in. The review could highlight good practice to share.

The meeting concluded at 11.25 am.

Councillor Cal Corkery
Chair