

MINUTES OF OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Wednesday, 10 May 2023
(7:01 - 8:52 pm)

Present: Cllr Glenda Paddle (Chair), Cllr Dorothy Akwaboah (Deputy Chair), Cllr Andrew Achilleos, Cllr Fatuma Nalule, Cllr Ingrid Robinson, Cllr Paul Robinson, Cllr Muazzam Sandhu, Cllr Phil Waker and Cllr Mukhtar Yusuf; Sajjad Ali and Richard Hopkins

Also Present: Cllr Saima Ashraf

Apologies: Cllr Donna Lumsden, Glenda Spencer and Sarfraz Akram

42. Declaration of Members' Interests

There were no declarations of interest.

43. Minutes (4 April 2023)

The minutes of the meeting held on 4 April 2023 were confirmed as correct.

44. Barking & Dagenham Traded Partnership: Repairs & Maintenance

The Cabinet Member for Community Leadership and Engagement introduced an update on the Barking and Dagenham Traded Partnership Repairs and Maintenance service. It was noted that:

- Whilst the position in terms of repairs and maintenance had not been good, the Council had been addressing performance.
- It was vital that the Council met the demand for repairs, so that residents lived in decent homes which were maintained properly.
- The Council had recently engaged subcontractors to meet demand.
- The Council now had assurance around its repairs and maintenance data and was closely monitoring the data.

As part of the update to the Committee, the Strategic Director, My Place (SDMP) also advised that:

- The current data provided to the Committee looked significantly different to that previously presented, inasmuch that it was now known that the system used at that time produced inaccurate data, due to how cases were previously opened and closed.
- The team had since introduced a new Power BI system for testing the data, which provided much more granular data and a clearer picture of trend analyses and error points. As such, it was not possible to compare present data with that provided previously.
- The figures in the report had been based on those from six weeks prior, when the report had been drafted, and had moved on since this point. The team now had much more reliability and assurance around the figures, with the resulting now being used to improve the service and enable the repairs to be risk-rated

and actioned as quickly as possible.

- Additional contractors had been onboarded to help action repairs. It was anticipated that by period six, the Council would be in a very strong position in terms of the backlog. Work was also being front-loaded. The Council currently had 5,000 outstanding repairs; however, 2-3,000 would be within its normal range of outstanding repairs and as such, there was a 50/50 split of repairs that were currently within target and those that were not. At the end of the financial year, the team had split anything that had come into the system prior to 1 March 2023, and anything that came in after this; this enabled a four-week period for the team to focus entirely on overdue repairs.
- Lots of work was being undertaken, specifically around data, performance and setting the expectations of the operatives and staff as to what was expected of them going forward. Whilst figures were not currently still where the service aimed to be, work would continue to improve these.
- Additional regulatory changes were anticipated in the near future, with the service needing to be ready for and already preparing for these by bringing forward and completing as many repairs as possible to achieve targets.
- A new Chief Executive Officer (CEO) had started at Barking and Dagenham Maintenance Services (BDMS), as well as a new Managing Director and a new team of external consultants, who were supporting the Power BI system to ensure accurate data.
- Significant risk was still present in terms of legal disrepair, including damp and mould cases, repairs, and voids. Whilst nationally, there had been a significant focus on damp and mould cases, the Council had a plan to address these.
- Phase one of the service recovery plan centred around clearing the current backlog and ensuring that the business as usual (BAU) cases were underway, with phase two being around ensuring that changes made were sustainable. The team had introduced some new key targets to be adhered to, such as a ten-day turnaround time for getting properties surveyed where damp and mould cases had been identified and a twenty-day turnaround included in that ten days, for the initial works to be completed. A new team had been set up within the Council as part of its compliance function, that was monitoring this.
- The Council had made damp and mould, its seventh area of compliance. Cases sat within the Compliance team, who monitored the works through the damp and mould pathway. Previously, when cases were completed, these would be closed down, with residents then having to begin the reporting process again if they were unsatisfied with works undertaken; jobs were now kept open even after repairs were undertaken, with the Council checking in with residents at the three-month and six-month markers, to ensure that residents were satisfied.
- The Council had also now started to profile where damp and mould cases were occurring, to understand and target any wider structural issues. The Council had also put into its contract with BDMS, a 20% post-inspection rate for BDMS to undertake on its subcontractors and its own operatives, and the Council also did its own percentage of minor checks on these inspections.
- The Council had interrogated and verified every single piece of compliance information and was confident that the information was entirely up-to-date and accurate. It was now looking to do this with its repairs, as some of that data had not yet been verified, and the Power BI system was enabling the Council to understand any errors. Within the next six months, it was hoped that all information would be verified, all home visits carried out and a robust set of data and insights produced.

In response to questions from Members, the SDMP stated that:

- A key challenge would be in improving the behaviours, cultures and the outputs of staff that were delivering on this work, which could mean management changes to ensure that staff were being well-led.
- Whilst it was difficult to determine whether productivity had already improved, discussions were being had with operatives to realign them with expectations. Whilst operatives were keen to do a good job, productivity had not yet changed and the improvements made had been mainly due to employing sub-contractors to fill in the gaps in service. The Council and BDMS were now also working more closely, with BDMS working hard to improve its service, such as through employing new disrepair surveyors.
- As part of redefining the contractor service, the Council had been very clear about its objectives and expectations of BDMS. It had also discussed multi-skilling training opportunities with operatives, which would enable operatives to undertake more tasks as needed in residents' homes and prevent multiple operatives needing to attend a single job. It was also hoped that this would empower operatives to be able to carry out any repairs that they saw and deemed necessary when attending jobs. The Council was also expecting BDMS to have a strong management, that dealt with performance issues in a consistent manner.
- The modelling of service delivery was based on the number of regular jobs, and those that were outstanding. The throughput was calculated as a percentage of the jobs coming in, which was a standard industry calculation, and the Council benchmarked itself against similar boroughs; however, there was a caveat in that whilst boroughs may have similar stock sizes, these may not all be in the same condition.
- Service targets had been set by the SDMP, which were within the 'good' range as classified by the sector. Whilst these targets were stretching, it was felt that aspirational targets were important as what the Council expected for its customers. These targets were under constant review, with the SDMP meeting on a weekly basis with BDMS and its Data Insight team to monitor these. Power BI was very helpful in helping colleagues to pinpoint any issues and begin to embed changes to improve these.
- The Contact Centre within the Council was set up to answer BDMS calls and there was also an online triaging form that could be used. The Council was looking at how processes could be streamlined to make these simpler.
- The Housing Revenue Account (HRA) was a set amount of money, that the Council was having to use to cover more than ever before, such as compliance work, repairs, planned works, planned maintenance works and fireproofing. As such, there were tensions over this funding, which were common to all local authorities. The Council was allocating its resources to ensure its buildings were safe and secure (such as to damp and mould cases), and this may mean that it would spend less on such things as replacing and upgrading kitchens and bathrooms.
- By month six, a decision would need to be made as to whether the current BDMS contract could continue, or whether other arrangements would need to be made.
- The Council was picking up "red flags" earlier; when disrepair cases came through, there was usually a pattern to these in that those who had been through a complaints procedure and said that they had exhausted this, were

likely to take a disrepair claim. Legal disrepair companies were also knocking on residents' doors and enticing people into contracts, with the Council working to educate people as to these and having introduced some extra resources from MyPlace into the Law and Governance Team to assist with this work.

- MyPlace was working to undertake older disrepairs cases as quickly as possible, as well as to triage newer cases and to deal with these in a different way, to keep the amount of these down.
- The Council had three different voids targets: one for minor voids (e.g. where residents moved out, the Council received the keys, undertook minor cleaning, decoration and compliance tests and the property was in good condition), one for major voids (e.g. a major component needed replacing, such as a new roof or kitchen) and one for decent voids (e.g. where two or three major components needed replacing). Whilst the Council could turn around minor voids quickly, this was often not the case for major and decent voids, and it needed to focus on improving these in future.
- The sector was in an ever-increasing regulatory environment, and incidents also led the sector to rethink its priorities and how it carried out works. The Government was also currently piloting four-yearly inspection regimes. It was essential that the Council focused on improving its current service, as well as had the necessary time to plan and look towards the future.
- Both the Council's workforce and the subcontractors' workforce were monitored on their progress and data.

The Committee asked that the SDMP return in six months' time, to report on the progress of the service.

45. Regulator of Social Housing, Update Report - Health and Safety Compliance

The Cabinet Member for Community Leadership and Engagement introduced an update on the Regulator of Social Housing Health and Safety Compliance. It was noted that:

- The Council was very committed to the health, safety and wellbeing of its residents, and had worked very closely with the Regulator.
- It was on track to complete all works and had met regularly with the Regulator over the previous 18 months. Positive engagement had been undertaken, with the Council updating the Regulator on its action plans and roadmaps. Lots of engagement had also been undertaken with residents.
- Whilst there was greater intervention from the Government in terms of regulatory processes, all local authorities were affected by this. The Council was working with the Government and was clear on what it was delivering.

The SDMP also advised on the following:

- In February 2022, the Regulator formally announced that the Council had been found non-compliant in all six areas of compliance that were monitored, which was largely due to the Council not having the relevant data to evidence its certifications and inspections.
- The Council had since verified every piece of information through its new True Compliance system, through which it was able to robustly report its compliance position to the Regulator.

- The Council had set a roadmap of getting back to a position of full compliance by August 2023; progress now showed that this would be achieved by the end of May 2023. The final action had been to ensure that a five-year electrical testing programme for all domestic properties was in place, which had been mobilised in May. This programme would conclude in 2026 and was spread across four different contractors, to lessen the risk of non-achievement. These contractors were being monitored very closely.
- Engagement with the Regulator had been essential in helping the Council to consider the cause of its previous non-compliance, opportunities missed and the necessary assurances that needed to be put in place, to prevent future issues.
- The Council had been fully transparent throughout the process. It was going to enter into a voluntary undertaking with the Regulator, to show that it was committed to the health, safety and well-being of its residents and to show that it wished to learn from its previous mistakes.
- The Council was using the process followed for its compliance journey, for that of its repairs service and to improve its repairs position.

In response to questions from Members, the SDMP stated that:

- Prior to compliance, the Council was using different systems to present and record information which had led to there being a number of non-verified certificates and gaps in its knowledge of the data. As such, the Council could not previously be clear on what it had tested. Whilst there was a level of tolerance in compliance, in resolving its issues, the Council had taken a completely risk-averse approach and had ensured that every single piece of information had been tested and verified.
- A report had been commissioned by BDMS in Autumn 2021 for Pennington Choices to undertake a compliance health check; this had found non-compliance across a number of areas. The Council then worked with BDMS to resolve any issues, with a decision then taken to undertake a health check of the Council's own services. Pennington Choices completed this in November 2021, which showed that the Council was also non-compliant. On the basis of this, the Council self-referred itself to the Regulator, who had also concluded that the Council was non-compliant at this time.
- The Council had established a new Compliance leadership team with a dedicated Head that was focused solely on delivering on compliance, rather than on procurement, contracts and compliance as under the previous structure. The Council had also relied on Savills to undertake its Fire Risk Assessment (FRAs). The Council had a two-year contract with Savills, to firstly ensure service recovery, and secondly to ensure firm foundations and then to train Council staff so that they could undertake these professional inspections themselves.
- Whilst by law, there was six regulatory areas that needed to be considered, the Council had added damp and mould as a seventh area, to ensure that this had sufficient focus.
- The Council's Executive Team had also highlighted to Directors and Heads of Service, the importance of ensuring that compliance health, safety and wellbeing was the responsibility of all teams across the Council.
- The Council was also undertaking work with residents as to their awareness of compliance testing and why this was important.

The Chair highlighted the importance of all departments communicating effectively together and expressed her support that this was now occurring. She noted that this item would return to the Committee in the new municipal year.

46. Work Programme

The Work Programme was agreed.