

MINUTES

Community Services Scrutiny Panel

28th October, 2008

Present: Councillors Howarth (in the Chair), Cowper, Laverick, Mavin, Norman, Robinson, D Smith, Walton and Young.

Also Present: Councillors Colledge, Kellett, Marsden, Simpson, Stoddart and Thomson.

1. Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Crooks, Lightley and McDonnell.

2. Minutes

The Minutes of the Meeting held on 30th September, 2008, were confirmed as a correct record, subject to it being noted that Councillor Norman had submitted her apologies for absence.

3. Review of Council House Repairs

The Head of Property Services, Responsive Maintenance Manager and Portfolio Holder for Communities were in attendance to update Members with progress made towards the recommendations made in the Report of November, 2007, and to advise of the performance of the Repairs service.

Since April, 2008, the number of emergency and non-urgent repairs completed on time had been at least 97% and in some months, 99%. The results of the Gas Satisfaction Survey (April – November, 2008) were very pleasing with 100% of tenants being satisfied with the workmanship and the attitude of staff. Whilst only 91% of respondents had reported that workmen showed ID cards, it was possible that many tenants were familiar with the Council's repairs workforce. Staff had been reminded to show their ID cards when attending appointments.

Similarly the results of the Repairs Satisfaction Survey were very pleasing, with only the showing of ID cards (83%) being lower than the others. Again, it was considered that this arose as many tenants were familiar with the workforce.

The Exceptions System allowed potential missed appointments to be spotted in advance which allowed alternative staff to be dispatched or the customer to be contacted. Staff continued to use the handheld telephone/PDA communication system, which following upgrades, was now performing much better and many of the blackspots had been eliminated.

Re-let times on void properties had increased by 4 days since last year to 47 days. This had been due to a great extent to the inclusion of one particularly difficult to let property which had been empty for 917 days. Additionally the number of void properties at any one time was difficult to predict and when the number was high, it was difficult to carry out all of the necessary works. Some void properties were in very poor condition, particularly where previous tenants had refused to allow modernisation works to be carried out in the past. Three major house fires had also added to the workload.

The Panel had previously recommended that ongoing training be provided for staff. This had been carried out over the last 12 months and the introduction of the Repair Finder allowed both customers and Customer Services to identify repairs and was working very well.

A small number of recharges had been carried out where the emergency reporting system had been used by tenants to bypass the appointments system, although it was difficult to prove misuse of the system. Efforts were being made to reduce this problem.

Members had previously been reminded that customer repairs must be reported to Customer Services to be logged at the first point of contact. This provided an audit trail and enabled the jobs to be actioned more quickly than if they were reported to Officers direct.

The Panel were very pleased with the progress made and congratulated the Head of Property Services and his staff for the work they had done. It was hoped that the same standard of work would continue following the move to the new Unitary Authority.

The Chairman thanked the Head of Property Services, Responsive Maintenance Manager and Portfolio Holder for Communities for attending the Meeting.

4. Review of Playing Pitch Strategy

At the last Meeting of the Panel, the Technical Support Manager (Environment & Leisure), Streetscene Technical Officer and Policy and Regeneration Manager had been in attendance for a review of the Panel' previous scrutiny of the Playing Pitch Strategy.

A draft report had been produced following the Meeting, copies of which had been circulated to all Members.

It was agreed that subject to minor amendments to paragraphs 1.5 and 4.5.1 and the addition of a further recommendation reading 'That this report and recommendations be brought to attention of the new Unitary Authority and relevant Workstreams', the report be passed to the Scrutiny Committee for their consideration.

5. Any Other Business

The Chairman reminded Members that the next Panel meeting was to be held on 25th November, 2008, the business being to approve the final report on the scrutiny of Council House Repairs.

The Meeting terminated at 6.15 pm

SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

REPORT OF THE COMMUNITY SERVICES SCRUTINY PANEL

REVIEW SCRUTINY OF COUNCIL HOUSE REPAIRS

1. Background

- 1.1 Council house repairs had originally been scrutinised as part of the Building Services Best Value Improvement Plan in 2003. The topic had been reviewed by the Panel on several occasions, the most recent being in November, 2007, when four recommendations had been made. These recommendations were subsequently approved and adopted by Cabinet.

2. Actions

- 2.1 The Head of Property Services and Responsive Maintenance Manager attended the Panel's Meeting on 28th October, 2008, and together with the Portfolio Holder for Communities, updated the Panel on progress made towards the recommendations made in the last report.

3. Outcomes

- 3.1 Since April, 2008, the number of emergency and non-urgent repairs completed on time has been at least 97% and in some months, 99%. The results of the Gas Satisfaction Survey (April – November, 2008) show that 100% of tenants were satisfied with the workmanship and the attitude of staff.
- 3.2 The Exceptions system of the new Northgate system allows potential missed appointments to be spotted in advance which allows alternative staff to be dispatched or the customer to be contacted. Staff continue to use the handheld telephone/PDA communication system, which following upgrades, is now performing much better and many of the blackspots have been eliminated.
- 3.3 Re-let times on void properties have increased by 4 days since last year to 47 days. This was due to a great extent to the inclusion of one particularly difficult to let property which had been empty for 917 days. Additionally the number of void properties at any one time is difficult to predict and when the number is high, it is difficult to carry out all of the necessary works. Some void properties are in very poor condition, particularly where previous tenants had refused to allow modernisation works to be carried out in the past. Three major house fires had also added to the workload.
- 3.4 The Panel had previously recommended that ongoing training be provided for staff. This has been carried out over the last 12 months and the introduction of the Repair Finder allows both customers and Customer Services to identify repairs and is working very well.
- 3.5 A small number of recharges have been carried out where the emergency reporting system had been used by tenants to bypass the appointments system, although it is difficult to prove misuse of the system. Efforts are being made to reduce this problem.
- 3.6 Members have previously been reminded that customer repairs must be reported to Customer Services to be logged at the first point of contact. This provides an audit trail and enables the jobs to be actioned more quickly than if they are reported to Officers direct.

3.7 The Panel are very pleased with the progress made and congratulate the Head of Property Services and his staff for the work they have done. It is hoped that the same standard of work would continue following the move to the new Unitary Authority.

4. Recommendations

4.1 That procedures continue to operate to deter tenants who persist in using the emergency call out repairs service as an out of hours repair service, including the possibility of charging after a warning has been given.

4.2 That the Head of Property Services and his staff be thanked and congratulated for their efforts in bringing about the improvements noted and the high standard of the service they provide.

4.3 That this report and recommendations be brought to the attention of the new Unitary Authority with the expectation that the Authority will support Property Services provision to the high standard currently being achieved by the City of Durham Department.

Community Services Scrutiny Panel
November 2008