
Housing Online- Repairs

Housing Scrutiny Commission: 27th February 2023

Lead Member for Housing: Cllr Elly Cutkelvin
Lead Director: Chris Burgin

Useful information

- Ward(s) affected: ALL
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- Report version number: 1.0

1. Summary

This report provides an update to the Housing Scrutiny Commission on the delivery of Housing Online- Repairs. This relates specifically to the move to significantly increase the number of repairs reported online and repairs enquiries made online. The report provides an update on progress to date in relation to sign ups and the support provided to our digitally excluded tenants.

2. Recommended

2.1 The Housing Scrutiny Commission are asked to note and make comment on the update in relation to the delivery of Housing Online for repairs and the associated hardstops to the Customer Service Centre in relation to calls regarding repairs enquiries and the reporting of repairs (with the exception of emergency repairs, communal repairs and leaseholder repairs.)

3. Scrutiny / stakeholder engagement

3.1 A full programme of consultation took place ahead of the changes including consultation with Housing Scrutiny Commission, the Tenants Forum and multiple meetings with ward councillors.

3.2 In addition, tenants were written to advising of the proposed changes, emailed and texted (where emails and mobile phone numbers were available.) Tenants received further information regarding the service in the annual rent letters and the changes were publicised in Council buildings.

4. Background

Leicester City Council uses NEC Housing as its main Housing System, part of this product is Housing Online, which allows Housing tenants and applicants to sign up and access services online, including reporting repairs, making enquiries about existing repairs, viewing rent statements and if eligible, bidding for properties on the Leicester Home Choice scheme.

At the start of January 2022, 4700 tenants (almost 1 in 4) had signed up for a Housing Online account, with only 3% of repairs reported online.

In 2021, 91,000 repairs calls were made to the Customer Service Centre, making this one of the most resource intensive areas for the call centre and a priority area to reduce call volumes. At its peak tenants were waiting 16 minutes for calls to be answered with abandonment rates of 61%. Whilst this had started to reduce down it was still unacceptably high. A decision was taken to move those tenants who could access and use IT to online services to reduce the pressure on the Customer Service Centre and to improve the level of service received by tenants ensuring waiting times were reduced.

Additionally with online services tenants can access the services they need 24 hours a day.

Following the rollout out of an extensive communications plan to tenants and councillors and detailed training for staff in Housing, Customer Services and Neighbourhood Services in August 2022 Customer Services hardstopped calls in relation to repairs enquiries. The following month Customer Services also hardstopped calls relating to the reporting of repairs (with the exception of emergency repairs, leaseholder repairs and communal repairs.)

4.1 Support for tenants

From an early stage it was identified that some tenants may face barriers to accessing online services these might include challenges with accessing IT equipment, language barriers, lack of IT skills and issues with mobility. Whilst the aim was to increase uptake of online services for the majority of our tenants it was also recognised that some tenants, even with additional support and training, may never be able to use online services.

Working with Customer Services it was agreed that on the first occasion of contacting CSC all tenants would be able to report one repair by phone and then be referred to access online services. If they were unable to use online services Customer Service staff were trained to take a Digital Exclusion Referral. Housing then assessed the referral and if deemed to be digitally excluded Customer Services would continue to take all repairs via the phone line. Since starting this process 1,025 tenants have been assessed as digitally excluded (approximately 5% of our total tenants.) The main reasons for digital exclusion were;

- Lack of access to IT (414)
- Disability (390)
- Lack of IT skills (211)

For tenants who are assessed as digitally able additional support is then provided to ensure they can access online services. Housing are providing a Housing Online Support Helpline which mirrors Council opening times. Support is always on hand for tenants to ensure they can access online services. In addition, Neighbourhood Service staff are trained in libraries to signpost tenants to PCs and crib sheets are provided. Adult Education will shortly be running pop up sessions for tenants who need additional support with accessing Housing Online. In order to build up sufficient numbers of tenants to make the sessions viable it was decided to run training sessions after 6 months. No tenants have been left without support during this period.

4.2 Progress to date

As at 23rd January 2023, 8213 tenants have signed up for Housing Online and around 16,500 repairs have been reported online (this equates to 14% of all repairs reported online.) This is a significant increase in the last 6 months where only 4700 tenants were signed up for Housing Online and only 3% of repairs were reported online. It is anticipated that this figure will steadily increase although tenants only tend to sign up for online services when they need to report a repair. One in four tenants has not reported a repair in the last 12 months. 25% of all reported repairs are emergency repairs and these are still reported to the Customer Service Centre by phone in order to ensure they are appropriately prioritised.

Takeup of online services varies significantly from ward to ward. With the highest level of uptake at 45% in Hamilton and Humberstone reducing to 20% in Westcotes. The average sign up rate across the city is now at 40% of all tenants having access to Housing Online.

In addition to monitoring the progress around take up of service, there is also a real commitment to evaluating feedback from tenants. All tenants who have a repair undertaken receive a Customer Satisfaction Survey by post. Tenants are now able to receive these online.

Feedback from tenants using the online service has been positive;

- 57% found Housing Online easy to use
- 30% found it average to use
- 13% found it difficult to use.

For those tenants who are struggling to use online services the Housing Online Support Helpline is available and tenants can also be referred to Adult Education for additional support.

4.3 Use of eforms

In addition to reporting repairs online tenants can also report issues relating to their tenancy using eforms. Tenants can also report repairs for leaseholder and communal areas via eforms.

5. Proposed next steps and support provision

Moving forward Housing and Customer Services will continue to promote uptake of Housing Online to tenants. It is anticipated that sign up and usage rates will continue to increase. The Housing Online Support Helpline will continue to advise and support tenants who need assistance with signing up and using the service.

From April 2023 only tenants who are assessed as digitally excluded will receive paper surveys. All other tenants will receive surveys via Housing Online.

The next stage of development for Housing Online by Dec 2023 will enable tenants to report repairs to communal areas and leaseholders to report repairs to their properties.

6. Financial, legal, equalities, climate emergency and other implications

6.1 Financial implications

The HRA makes a contribution in the region of £650k towards the cost of running the Customer Service Centre, based on call volumes from Council tenants. Ultimately, if a significant reduction in call volumes took place then this contribution is likely to reduce. However, this could take some time to materialise, and savings would be dependent on the ability of the CSC to reduce staffing numbers. At least some of the savings would be offset by additional administration within the Housing service.

Existing HRA budgets can accommodate the cost of implementation. This includes the additional staffing support which will be required during the implementation period. The use of these posts will mean a delay to savings which would otherwise have been declared.

Stuart McAvoy – Principal Accountant

6.2 Legal implications

In the last few years the Council has faced a significantly increased number of claims on behalf of tenants seeking damages for the Council's failure to carry out repairs within a reasonable period of time. These claims are largely precipitated by companies seeking potential claimants, who are then referred to specialist solicitors to pursue claims on a no win, no fee basis.

Such claims are now averaging 2-3 per week and incur significant time, resource and expense for both the Housing Services Division and the Legal Services Division.

In principle, any system that streamlines the reporting and completion of repairs is beneficial. It is important to note, however, that the Council, as landlord, will still be regarded as "being on notice" of the need to carry out repairs if those repairs are brought to the Council's attention by other means. It is sufficient for the tenant to inform any "responsible source" of a repair that is needed. For example, the Council will be considered to be "on notice" if the tenant notifies a Housing Officer or an operative present on the property to undertake some other work such as an annual gas safety check.

If the ability for tenants to report repairs by one prescribed mechanism is such that it leads to a more haphazard approach e.g. increased reports to Housing Officers and Repairs Operatives, this may give rise to a greater risk of failure to undertake repairs and, therefore, open the Council to the potential for more claims.

In order to reduce the risk of potential liability, it is helpful for repair work to be channelled to the correct area of the Council as quickly and reliably as possible.

Jeremy Rainbow – Principal Lawyer (Litigation)