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Report Of: Neil Wightman, Director of Housing

Portfolio: Cabinet Member for Housing Services

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1. General Update

- 1.1 It is seven months since responsibility for housing service delivery transferred to Westminster Council and a year since the Task Group issued its recommendations for service improvement. This report provides an update on progress against the recommendations and a general overview of housing service improvement activities. A status report against the recommendations is provided at Appendix A.
- 1.2 The Task Group recommendations were divided over three headings which form the structure for this report:
- Strategic priorities
 - Customer services
 - Major works and repairs
- 1.3 The new Housing Director took up post at the end of May and set out five key priorities for housing services, which recognise the areas identified by the Task Group and the needs of the housing service as a whole:
- a. Improve the responsiveness and quality of the repairs service and major works
 - b. Provide a better service for leaseholders, particularly in relation to major works
 - c. Support vulnerable residents
 - d. Develop a local offer and increase resident involvement, and
 - e. Prevent Homelessness
- 1.4 The service improvement priorities are underpinned by a programme of work to fully integrate housing services into the Council. That programme includes the transition of IT systems and culture change work. Together this work forms the housing service improvement programme.
- 1.5 Progress has been made against all of the Task Group's recommendations over the past year, but it is recognised that further improvements are needed to the service and it will take some time to fully integrate the housing service into the Council. Those that are not yet delivered have been incorporated into the housing service improvement programme and progress is tracked corporately.

2 Strategic Priorities

Culture change

- 2.1 The Task Group heard that the service lacked a customer service ethos and that it had distanced itself from residents. Culture change and improved communications with both residents and councillors were recommended.
- 2.2 The transfer of the service back into the Council and TUPE transfer of staff has accelerated the process of culture change. Staff previously located at CWH' offices at 21 Grosvenor Place now work from City Hall, consequently joint working between departments is now a matter of routine.
- 2.3 Staff have benefitted from the Council's programme of activities on the Westminster Way, and attendance at WCC and GPH staff conferences. Staff workshops have been held by external consultants to understand what remains to be addressed and a departmental awayday took place on 26th September which focussed on service improvement, culture and values.

Councillor Communications

- 2.4 Prior to the transfer, the contact centre structure was reviewed, and improvements and training are ongoing, including regular customer care training.
- 2.5 The Task Group recommended a change to the approach to answering calls and emails from councillors and residents, and points of contact. The dedicated team established to deal with members' enquiries is now a permanent part of the service delivery structure. Revised arrangements to deal with calls and emails from residents have resulted in significantly improved performance. Performance for the year to date is provided 3.4 of this report.

The Local Housing Services Offer

- 2.6 The immediate operational priority for the housing service is to restore its focus on residents, which is seen to have been lost. Historically, more residents engaged with the service through traditional residents' associations and estate inspections, and local access to the service was popular. The local offer seeks to reinstate those important elements and return the service to its previous position. The local housing service offer combines better access to housing staff locally; new ways for residents to engage with us and an offer to every estate or neighbourhood to develop an action plan which is jointly owned by residents and housing service advisers.
- 2.7 Development of the first estate action plan started on 24 October at Lillington & Longmoore estate with an event attended by the Cabinet Member for Housing and Director of Housing. The event included a visit from the mobile service Westminster on Wheels (WoW), estate walkabouts to identify issues for improvement and spring bulb planting.
- 2.8 The local housing services offer was launched in the October edition of 'Your Home', which provides news and events for housing residents. The offer includes:
 - An offer of help to residents to join or set up residents' associations
 - An offer to join a new online resident group to be involved in shaping services
 - Development of an estate action plan for every estate/neighbourhood
 - Estate walkabouts, linked to the estate action plans

- A new timetable for surgeries, including using more library locations and WoW visits to bring the service to more places
- 2.9 A timetable is in place for every housing service adviser to develop a plan with their local residents' association, resulting in 22 plans by December 2019.
- 2.10 The estate action plans will be reviewed monthly with Resident Associations and published on the housing website for residents to track progress.
- 2.11 To support the local offer, we have consulted staff on branded clothing and provided them with a branded jacket to be worn when working out of the office so that residents can find them more easily. The jackets were positively received by both residents and staff at the Lillington & Longmoore launch event.
- 2.12 Proposals to change the formal resident engagement structure were presented to the Cabinet Member in September for discussion. Consultation with resident representatives is being undertaken during October/November. The proposal includes a regular meeting with the Cabinet Member for Housing and Director of Housing.
- 2.13 The new online community of residents has been well received and 100 lessees have already joined the online lessee group. We are collecting names for the wider community following issue of 'Your Home' in October. We already have a list of issues to consult on so that momentum can be built with the groups quickly.
- 2.14 The online housing forum members will form a subset of the Council's wider online engagement community and will be offered the opportunity to comment on other Council services if they wish to do so.
- 2.15 The Westminster on Wheels initiative, providing a mobile surgery service has been a success, demonstrating the Council's commitment to providing residents with local, face to face services.
- 2.16 We are working with tech companies to develop mobile working technology so that staff are more effective when carrying out inspections, visiting residents and holding surgeries. This work is joined up with the Council's Customer Experience and Digital programme.
- 2.17 As at October 2019, nearly 1500 residents have visited the bus and for the period April-October:
- 95% were very happy or happy with the bus being on the estate.
 - 96% found the bus accessible
 - Nearly 3/4 of issues were resolved on the bus
 - 76% believed Westminster Housing services will improve
 - 84% found the service met their expectations
 - 40 referrals to the employment service have been made
- 2.18 Westminster on Wheels provides residents with access to a team of staff from different disciplines and quicker resolution than surgeries are able to provide. The current WoW vehicle is too large for many locations so leasing a smaller vehicle is being investigated. Some of the surgeries could then potentially be replaced by WoW, subject to consultation.
- 2.19 Plans to link estate walkabouts with WoW are in place and WoW and surgery dates are being advertised to the end of December.

2.20 Work to improve the effectiveness of surgeries is underway and over the Winter, a new plan will be drawn up for face to face services, to ensure all residents can access an effective service regardless of where they live in the borough. This will review the success of surgeries, WoW and area office reception services.

3 Customer Services

3.1 The Task Group heard that the contact centre (launched in June 2017) had failed to cope with call volumes. Call numbers were higher than predicted due to a repairs backlog which accumulated during re-letting of contracts and the transfer of responsibility from exiting to incoming service providers. There was a general complaint that the service had lost its local presence and that surgeries had not been successfully implemented.

3.2 Since the Task Group reported, incremental performance improvements have been made in both the repairs service and contact centre. Previous backlogs have been cleared and the spikes in call volumes experienced during the Autumn/Winter of 2017/18 have not been repeated.

3.3 Since April, contact centre performance has been positive, with call handling performance remaining within target. The IVR options were changed and are regularly reviewed and repeat calls have dropped through improving communication on repairs.

3.4 Year to date performance to the end of September 2019:

- 101,048 total calls received
- 82% of calls were answered within 30 seconds (target of 70%)
- 5% of calls were abandoned (target of <8%)
- 74% of calls were resolved on first contact (target of 60%)
- 87% of residents were satisfied with call handling (target 80%)
- 89% of complaints and 92% of members' enquiries were responded to within target

3.5 Satisfaction is measured through a post-call survey immediately after call handling. The figures are based on responses from 2776 callers. This gives a confidence interval of +/- 1.3%).

3.6 A speech analytics project started in September and is analysing 30,000 of calls which will help us understand the drivers of customer contact, reasons for service failure and tracking residents' emotions as they interact with the service. The results of this work will be available by the end of October.

3.7 The repairs service is also performing well against industry standards, with a number of service enhancements delivered by contractors.

3.8 The repairs service is making progress, with incremental improvements across the KPIs:

- 84% of repairs were completed on the first visit
- 93% of repairs appointments were kept
- 87% of routine repairs and 99.2% of emergency repairs were completed in priority
- Satisfaction with the repairs service is at 84%
- Satisfaction with the quality of repairs is at 83%

- Statutory services relating to electrical testing, gas safety checks and water tank monitoring all continue to perform very well, with compliance levels all at 100%.

- 3.9 Repairs satisfaction is based on a random sample of tenants are surveyed using phone and e-mail by Kwest, an independent market research company. The satisfaction figures relate to all contractors and are based on 1,832 replies YTD. This gives a confidence interval of +/-1.7%).
- 3.10 The repairs service is by far the largest customer service delivered to residents and failure to deliver can impact directly on quality of life. For example, a satisfaction rating of 84%, whilst an improvement on 18/19 performance, indicates that over 200 repairs per week have not been delivered to the satisfaction of residents. Service improvement work, in partnership with suppliers, will continue throughout the duration of the contracts, with the aim to achieve scores in the high nineties across all indicators.
- 3.11 A key concern was the volume of calls generated from residents chasing repairs. The repairs backlog was cleared and the volume of work in progress now remains under control.
- 3.12 Residents often call to seek reassurance that appointments will be kept, so repairs contractor Morgan Sindall now provide a text messaging service to keep tenants advised on the progress of their repair. Immediately after a repair order is raised, Morgan Sindall send the tenant a text to confirm the appointment; a text is sent the day before the appointment and on the day of the appointment, with a link to a vehicle tracker to monitor the progress of the contractor's van to the property. On completion a further text is sent with a link to a satisfaction survey service operated by 'Rant and Rave'. This service allows residents to provide direct and instant feedback about repairs that have been completed, and uses powerful data analytics to provide information on service quality and improvements needed.
- 3.13 Improving management of follow-on work is ongoing and is a source of confusion and frustration for residents. Co-location of Morgan Sindall staff with WCC staff and changing to an area based approach has helped speed up the process for authorising work and improved communications with residents. Issues can be escalated by staff to WCC/MS managers and at weekly joint meetings. However there is no formal escalation procedure for customers outside of the complaints process and progress in improving the process from the resident's perspective is ongoing.

4 Major works and repairs

- 4.1 The Task Group focussed on the need to reduce the costs associated with major works and improve affordability for lessees. Communication with lessees on major works was also called out for attention.
- 4.2 New major works contracts were mobilised in 2018 and the impact on the cost of managing works has been very positive. Those contracts cover planned works and cyclical repairs undertaken throughout Westminster for ten years.
- 4.3 The Project Management costs (including Procurement) for major works have halved following the award of the term contracts and are forecast to realise savings of approximately £28m over the full ten-year term.
- 4.4 When the Task Group met, project management costs were running at 16-18% and have been reduced to approximately 8%, with the reductions varying depending on the size of

the project. Further details of improvements are provided at Appendix A. It is recognised that lessees will not see the benefit of these changes for some time. It will take approximately 12 months for final bills to be issued for schemes procured under previous procurement arrangements.

- 4.5 The lessee billing process, particularly around timing, accuracy and frequency of bills needs improving. Work is in progress to address the required changes in time for the 2020/21 estimates, issued in March 2020. The actual service charge account invoices were redesigned and despatched at the end of September 2019. The invoices were in a simpler format and were accompanied by a new guide to the charges.
- 4.6 Currently, we issue half yearly estimated service charges and the second estimated demand was issued with the actual accounts. This will be the last time that we serve two estimated service charge demands for the same financial year. The estimated service charge demands for the period April 2020 to March 2021 will be a single annual estimated demand rather than two half yearly demands. The proposed changes and the new format will be tested by the online 100 lessee group prior to implementation in March 2020.
- 4.7 The on-line lessee forum are already commenting on changes and shaping priorities. A recent exercise covered self help online videos on a range of subjects chosen and prioritised by lessees. The videos will be available on the housing website before the end of 2019.
- 4.8 A review of lessee payment options is underway to ensure the options better reflect the current size of bills and the needs of lessees. Sinking funds will also be addressed and a report is due within the next two months.
- 4.9 Engagement with residents on major works projects typically starts 12-18 months before work is due. The engagement covers a range of methods and is aligned to the key milestones of the project. This approach allows residents to contribute at the initial planning and detailed design and approvals stage, before formal leaseholder consultation on costs. Residents can raise any issues they have in relation to the works being carried out, at an early stage. Formal leaseholder consultation reaffirms the discussions held with residents in the development of the project.
- 4.10 Recently the need to review the scope of works and to build in fire safety and H&S related works has caused delays to schemes. The above process has so far not been changed to keep residents advised when delays occur. As a result, some residents are unaware of the current status of work planned to their home and why progress is not being made. More work is needed to ensure regular communications are provided with residents once the consultation process has started.
- 4.11 For a typical project the engagement before formal leaseholder section 20 consultation consists of six written updates and up to three resident meetings/drop-ins/surgeries. From the introduction stage of a project there is a named officer in the property services communications team as a point of contact to coordinate queries and this includes a direct e-mail address for ease of contact. In addition, each project has a dedicated webpage and all correspondence and updates are published.

5 Next Steps

- 5.1 The housing service improvement programme will run for a further 12 months. Progress will continue to be tracked through a departmental programme board and through the Council's Change Board, chaired by the Chief Executive.