

Report of the Director of Housing and Communities

## **Updating the Repairs Policy**

### **Summary**

1. Our homes play an important role in the quality of our lives. Providing council homes which are safe, warm and comfortable creates solid foundations for living a healthy life. A crucial element of this is ensuring our council homes are well maintained and in a good state of repair, where the council provides tenants with a service which is positive, responsive, efficient, and flexible. As a council, we undertake around 27,000 repairs and servicing appointments each year within our council homes. We strive to ensure that each of these appointments is a positive experience for the tenant and significant work has gone into reducing repair wait times and increasing the number of repairs which are fixed on the first visit.
2. The repair service is guided by a 'Repairs Policy'. The existing policy was written a number of years ago and it is considered that would benefit from a refresh to ensure it responds to feedback from tenants and the changing legislative framework for social housing.
3. This paper seeks the views of Scrutiny members on the latest draft of the 'Responsive Repairs Policy for Tenants of Council Houses' (hereafter referred to as the 'repairs policy'). Following discussion at Scrutiny, the draft will be subject to tenant engagement to shape the final version prior to a formal decision on its adoption. The proposed engagement approach is set out within this report and Scrutiny's comments are also sought on this approach.

### **Background**

4. A 2023 – 28 Asset Management Plan was approved by Executive in December 2022. This sets the overarching policy framework for maintaining and improving our council housing stock. It sets an emphasis

on information-led decision making and commits to working alongside tenants to guide and deliver the service. The mission statement for the document is that “We are ONE TEAM, working with you in positive and responsive ways, always listening and improving our services. **We invest in and plan for the future, ensuring we support safe, sustainable, affordable and good quality homes.** Working in partnerships, we aim to support strong and diverse communities where you can live well and thrive.” The repairs policy and its subsequent use is one of a number of tools which are utilised to meet the objectives of the Asset Management Plan.

5. The repairs policy is also a communication tool. It is a method of engaging with tenants so that they can understand what they should expect from the service and to enable them to hold the council to account. To be effective the repairs policy needs to effectively speak to tenants, it needs to remove unnecessary jargon and provide clear messaging. The policy sets service standards under which performance will be measured.
6. The existing Repairs Policy was approved a number of years ago. The existing policy can be found on the council website - [responsive-repairs-policy-for-tenants-of-council-properties](#). The document is 36 pages in length and the language, structure and tone are not considered to be customer facing. In the time since the existing repairs policy was written there have been some significant changes in the social housing sector. This includes the introduction of Awaab’s law which seeks to add greater protection for tenants from hazards in the home and through the introduction of a Regulator of Social Housing. As such, the City of York Council housing service has been regulated since April 2024 and is measured against a set of Consumer Standards which seek to achieve positive outcomes for social housing tenants. The refreshed drafted policy seeks to both update our policies and procedures but to do so in a way which is easier to understand for tenants. This means a shift in language, tone and where possible a reduction in quantity. The latest draft is around half the length of the existing repairs policy document.
7. A number of the service standards in the revised draft are similar to the previous version. However, some new standards are introduced where gaps have been identified and greater emphasis is placed on identifying and removing hazards and taking account of tenants’ circumstances. The analysis section of this report provides a greater insight into the content of the drafted revised policy. However, at a high level, the

revised policy seeks to introduce or highlight some new approaches and ways of working, these are:

- Improved channels of communication, particularly in respect of updates regarding repair appointments;
- Greater clarity around positive adjustments being made for tenants where needed;
- The introduction of a 'Planned Repairs' standard – providing greater clarity and accountability around complex repair works;
- The strengthening of our approach around hazards, building on the requirements introduced by Awaab's law;
- Creating greater assurance around the services' positive response to repairs linked to hate crimes or domestic abuse.

## **Recommendations**

8. Health, Housing and Adult Social Care Scrutiny Committee are asked to consider the following questions:
  - i) Is the tone, language and structure of the drafted repairs policy suitably customer facing and clear?
  - ii) Does Scrutiny have any feedback on the service standards outlined in the draft repairs policy?
  - iii) Is the proposed method of tenant engagement the best way of capturing meaningful feedback in order to inform the final document?
  - iv) Are there any other relevant comments prior to the policy being taken forward for tenant engagement?

## **Analysis**

9. Attached to this report is the latest draft of the repairs policy. Scrutiny's feedback is welcomed on both the standards but also the tone, language and structure of the document. Following Scrutiny, a draft will be used to engage tenants with all feedback being used to inform the final document.
10. The service standards outlined in the repairs policy have been benchmarked against peers, both other housing associations with affordable housing stock in the city and more widely across the country using data from Housemark. A special thank you is reserved for Joseph

Rowntree Housing (JRHT) who have offered support and guidance in developing the updated repairs policy. It is considered that the standards identified in the policy are well aligned with the sector averages and provide a quality of service which is positive and meets the ambitions of the Consumer Standards.

11. The key service standards outlined in the policy are:

Three repair priorities:

- Emergency – where a repair issue needs to be addressed quickly because there is a risk of danger to a tenant’s health and safety or serious damage to a tenant’s home – the standard is to attend within 24 hours and includes access to an out of hours service;
- General – the majority of repairs are within this standard – the standard is to complete these repairs within 20 working days; and
- Planned – these are complex repairs where intrusive remedial works are needed, are likely to require more than one trade or a specialist contractor and a survey may be needed before works can begin – the standard is to complete these repairs within 65 working days.

Investigations of Potential Hazards

- Investigation by a suitably qualified inspector within 10 working days of report;
- To provide a written summary to the tenant within 2 working days of the visit to include details of whether a hazard was found, the risk to tenants, anything necessary to make the situation safe, how the issue will be permanently rectified and the likely timescales, and a key contact for on-going discussions; and
- If a HHSRS Category 1 hazard is identified, it will be removed within 5 working days of the summary document being issued to the tenant. This can be increased to ‘Emergency’ timescales based on the individual tenant and the nature of the hazard.

Repair Reporting

Repairs can be reported in the following ways:

- By telephone (open Monday to Friday 08:00 – 17:00, 24-hour service available for emergency repairs only)
- By e-mail
- To any Housing Officers or Tradesperson who visits the home
- In writing

During 2025, the ability for tenants to book their own repair through an online portal will go live. This will allow repairs to be booked at any time on any day.

#### Repairs service tradesperson operating hours

- Monday to Thursday 08:00 – 16:00 and until 15:00 on Friday.  
When a repair is booked, tenants are allocated one of the following timeslots:
- morning appointments: 8.00 to 12.30
- afternoon appointments: 13:00 to 16:00 (15:00 on Friday)
- Avoiding school run - between 9.30 and 14.30

12. In addition to the service standards summarised above, the policy also covers tenant responsibilities, the rechargeable repairs approach, the use of alternative accommodation, access arrangements, performance monitoring, post-work inspections, how a Right to Buy application affects the repairs service available, and feedback and complaints.

#### *Service Standards Analysis*

13. The timescales outlined within the Emergency and General repairs are consistent with the current policy and sector averages. It is not considered that these need to be adjusted prior to tenant engagement. It is considered that delivering a service which meets the standards outlined would reflect the ambitions of the Consumer Standards. It is considered that the standards are achievable, set a fair and reasonable expectation for tenants, and provides a quality of service which will work for most tenants most of the time. The emergency standard now puts a greater emphasis on repairing the issue/defect at the same time as making the situation safe. This follows feedback from tenants who have stated that multiple visits from tradespeople can be disruptive. This updated approach may increase costs associated with the out of hours service but will create efficiencies and savings through reduced visits overall. The repair standards seek to provide greater confidence for tenants in the council's response to repairs which are associated with hate crimes or domestic abuse.
14. The Planned Standard is new for the council. At present, all jobs which are not of an urgent nature sit within the General Repair Standard, which is that the repair will be complete within 20 working days. It is considered that this sets an unrealistic expectation around how quickly some complex or specialist repairs can realistically be completed. Whilst clearly the repairs team endeavour to complete all repair jobs swiftly, at present, once a complex repair exceeds 20 working days there is no

performance measure that incentivises its completion quickly. This new standard is designed to both provide a realistic expectation for tenants around when an issue will be resolved whilst also providing a positive performance target for the repairs team to complete the work. This policy is aiming to reduce the 'drift' of complex jobs which has been the subject of some tenant feedback. The approach of having three tiers of repair priority is consistent with a large number of other affordable housing providers.

15. The revised policy also provides new standards around the identification and treatment of potential hazards in a home. The policy introduces specific timescales which reflect the relative urgency of this type of repair. A visit will be undertaken within 10 working days of the hazard being reported. The tenant will then receive a written summary of the visit and next steps including the likely timescale for the completion of the repair 2 working days after the visit. The timescale for resolving the issue will depend on the complexity of the repair, the level of risk, and any additional needs the tenant may have. The policy seeks to provide significant assurance that individual tenants circumstances will be taken into account and hazards will be prioritised further where appropriate. The standards outlined in this policy reflect the new standards introduced under Awaab's law.
16. The revised policy does not seek to introduce any changes around how repairs are reported, operating times of the Customer or Tradesperson services. However, the team are currently working to ensure that repairs can be booked online at any time of day through the online portal. This service will be available in the coming year. There has been very little feedback from tenants to date which suggests that the current hours of operation of the service are incorrect and should be adjusted. There is some variety in the operating hours of the repairs service at different affordable housing providers. However, the vast majority do not offer weekend or evening appointments. The City of York Council repairs performance indicates that the existing working approach is ensuring that the majority of repairs are completed within the target timescales. This financial year, on a month-by-month measurement basis, between 87% and 91% of repairs have been completed within the target timescales.

#### Tenant Engagement Approach

17. Obtaining the views of tenants on the draft policy is crucial to ensuring that the council house repairs service meets expectations. In order to capture views, two approaches are proposed.

18. The first is to capture as many views as possible on the specific standards outlined. The repairs policy is a significant sized document, and it is considered that more tenants will engage in the process if feedback can be provided on the key points in a time effective way. Therefore, the intention is to provide a short summary of the draft policy. Within this will be a number of key questions, primarily related to the service standards. For example, do you believe that the customer service opening hours meet your needs? This survey will capture quantitative responses whilst also providing tenants with the opportunity to provide further details, so they could include further details of what opening hours would work for them, for example.
19. The second element of the engagement approach will be to utilise a tenant focus group to capture more detailed feedback. This approach would involve a group of volunteer tenants receiving the full document and being guided through a feedback session. This approach would enable a deeper exploration of the service standards but will also provide an opportunity for feedback on such things as the tone, language, and structure of the document.
20. It is envisaged that the tenant engagement process will be complete by Spring. A final version of the policy will then be drafted alongside a decision report which outlines the feedback provided by both Scrutiny and tenants.

### **Council Plan**

21. The City of York Council Plan 'One City for all' sets out four core commitments around Equalities and Human Rights, Affordability, Climate, and Health. Maximising the provision of good quality, safe and healthy council housing is considered integral to all four core commitments.

### **Contact Details**

**Author:**

**Chief Officer Responsible for the report:**

**Michael Jones  
Head of Housing Delivery**

**Pauline Stuchfield  
Director of Housing and**

**And Asset Management Communities**

**Report  
Approved**



**Date** 23/11/2024

Chief Officer's name: Pauline Stuchfield  
Title: Director of Housing &  
Communities

**Wards Affected:** List wards or tick box to indicate all

**All**



**Background Papers:**

None

**Annexes**

Annex A - Responsive Repairs Policy for Tenants of Council Houses

**Abbreviations**

HHSRS - Housing Health and Safety Rating System Operating guidance