

Questions from Residents

Items from the West Resident Association Meeting 9/1/18

How to keep the repairs service working well

Concerns were raised about increased staff turn-over at Mears and inefficient repairs.

The meeting agreed that a high quality, efficient and effective service was a top priority for tenants. There were concerns that the quality of the repairs service will deteriorate as the council comes to the end of the contract with Mears in 2020; staff will look for jobs elsewhere and there may be less incentive to provide a good service.

It was agreed to flag up this concern and start a citywide discussion with the council about how tenants can feed back problems and contribute constructively to ensuring the contract is kept up to scratch over its final two years.

Response: Glyn Huelin, Business & Performance Manager, Property & Investment, Telephone: 01273 293306

Thank you for your comments and we completely understand your concerns.

The repairs contract with Mears comes to an end in March 2020 and work is now underway to begin considering options for this service in the future. We will be talking to residents at a future Area Panel, and we will involve residents in the consideration of options and the design of future contracts.

In terms of the existing contracts, these will continue to be managed through the Core Group which includes five residents nominated by the Home Service Improvement Group (SIG) alongside senior managers from both the council and Mears. I encourage residents to share any concerns with the Home SIG, and these residents will be able to raise them at the Core Group. The Core Group will also develop and hold an action plan to manage the final years of the contract effectively.

In addition, the council works closely with Mears across a number of operations meetings and will continue to keep, Mears resources, performance and contract arrangements under close review as we enter the final two years of the contract.

Although the current contract will end in 2020, many contractor staff will have their employment and terms and conditions protected under legislation and would continue to work on any future contracts.

Recycling notices on bins at Clarendon & Ellen

Clarendon and Ellen have been trying to get a notice on their recycling bin, asking people to flatten cardboard before putting it in the bin. If this isn't done, the cardboard does not get collected. There hasn't been any progress with getting a notice, and they would like this to go to the Area Panel.

Response: Robert Keelan, Housing Manager, Telephone: 01273 293261

I am sorry to hear there has been a delay in getting these notices. I have placed an order with the council's Print & Design team for signs to advise residents to fold cardboard before putting it in the recycling bins. The stickers should be in place by the end of February.

Delayed bids to Estate Development Budget

In previous years, Knoll Residents Association had two EDB bids agreed which were never done. These are:

- a) 2013-14: Stapley Court – removal of algae*
- b) 2015-16: Knoll Close – carpeting on bare concrete floor*

The Association was told recently that they had to apply again for this work. However, Resident Association members have said they are not prepared to do this, as money has already been allocated and agreed once. The fact the work did not get done was not their fault, and they shouldn't have to apply again. There is also concern that these bids will not fall within the present EDB guidelines.

There has been some disillusionment amongst Knoll RA committee members about this, and it is difficult to now persuade them to participate in the EDB process.

It was agreed to ask for these bids to be reinstated into the current year, without the Association having to go through the formal bidding process again.

Ann Tizzard has paperwork and information on the bids, and can be contacted to discuss this.

Response: Keith Perry, Contracts Manager, Mears, Telephone: 01273 574355

Thank you for your enquiries. Our records show that Stapley Court was jet washed on 12 August 2014. As there are reports of algae, the council's surveyors will inspect Stapley Court and assess what work is needed and liaise with ourselves how this will be done.

I am sorry that there has been a delay to the carpeting. We did attempt to do this project, however, there was a problem with the consultation that is needed with leaseholders before the job can start. The consultation has been revived and subject to satisfactory completion, the work will be carried out in 2018/19.

I would encourage the association to raise questions about the progress of works when they arise and not to be put off making further EDB bids.

Items from the Central Residents Only meeting 4/1/18

Defunct cables and aerials

There is an on-going problem with a lot of defunct cables on the outside of blocks of flats. These come loose, blow around in the wind, and drop across people's windows.

It was noted that this is a city-wide problem, and that the Council need to be pressed to take some action to sort it out. Raising the issue locally through Residents Associations is not getting any results.

Response: Glyn Huelin, Business & Performance Manager, Property & Investment, Telephone: 01273 293306

Thank you for your enquiry, I understand this is an issue across the city and the effect that this has on residents.

In some cases cables are the responsibility of the council and in some cases they belong to suppliers. The council are usually responsible for cables when there is a communal aerial system. In these cases we will arrange for our contractors to attend and re-fix and tidy the cabling.

The majority of cables causing issues in council blocks belong to the suppliers and we would encourage residents to contact their suppliers to address any issues with cabling.

We will work with residents and their associations as far as we can to support the resolution of any problems and we are currently working with the Bates Estate TRA along with Virgin to help resolve the issues on their estate.

Items from the East Residents Only Meeting 11/1/18

Rent and Council Tax payments

Tenants are no longer able to pay their rent and council tax at the Post Office. They have been told by the Post Office that this is because the council doesn't want to pay the necessary fee to the Post Office for this service.

This makes it very difficult for residents who live on very low incomes and manage their money weekly in cash. Many of these are pensioners who collect their pension from the Post Office each week and immediately make all their bill payments over the counter.

Other avenues for local cash payments have already been restricted with the closure of local housing offices and changes that mean people can no longer pay by cheque at the bank.

The only option for local cash payments is for people to go to shops that have a pay point, but it can be difficult for many residents to do this every week.

The council has said that they want people to pay by direct debit, but this makes it very difficult for those living on a tight budget to manage their finances and make sure they don't go into debt.

The meeting felt that these changes, which make it harder for people to pay their rent and council tax, increases the likelihood that people will fall behind in their rent and council tax payments, thus increasing the level of debt owed to the council.

Response: Lynn Yule, Housing Income Manager, Telephone: 01273 293240

Thank you very much for feeding back of tenants' concerns. In April 2015 the council transferred business from the Co-operative Bank to Lloyds Bank Plc. However, the council continued a separate bill payments account with the Co-operative Bank which enabled customers to make payments via the Post Office.

Unfortunately, the Co-operative Bank is removing their bill payments service and the council's contract is due to expire at the end of this month. As a result, Post Office payments were removed as a payment method option from 1 December 2017. Although customers are no longer able make payments through the Post Office, many Post Offices are located within shops which are PayPoint outlets. There are approximately 150 PayPoint outlets in the Brighton & Hove area, still enabling residents to make their rent payments when collecting their money from the Post Office, or buying their groceries.

For those customers who have a transactional bank account there are alternative payment methods to PayPoint and direct debit:

- By debit card online using our secure server
- By bank standing order
- By telephone ~ 01273 291908 24 hours a day

For those tenants who do not have a transactional bank account and manage their money weekly in cash, while cash payments should not be sent by post, payment can be made by postal order and sent to:

Housing Centre
Unit 1
Fairway Trading Estate
Eastergate Road
Brighton
BN2 4QL

Any individual tenant experiencing difficulty can contact the Housing Customer Service Team on 01273-293030 where colleagues will be more than happy to help and to talk through suitable individually tailored solutions.

Laundry tokens

The shift to token payments for laundries has been difficult for a lot of residents. This is even more difficult because the tokens are often not available at council offices, such as Lavender Street, so people have to go all the way into town to Jubilee Library.

The meeting felt that this happens because the tokens are not emptied out of the machines and re-distributed often enough.

Response: Hilary Edgar, Housing Service Operations Manager, Telephone: 01273 293250

Thank you for raising the difficulty that some residents are experiencing in accessing laundry tokens as part of our new laundry contract.

We recognise the fact machines will only take tokens is inconvenient for some residents, and apologise for this. The machines were initially going to take cash. However on visiting the sites and listening to tenants concerns regarding vandalism and breakdowns due to thefts or attempted thefts, we have renegotiated with the supplier to not have cash on any of the sites.

Tokens are available for purchase at the following libraries during hours they are staffed – Jubilee, Whitehawk, Moulsecoomb and Hove.

We are exploring the option of token machines that can be fitted in nearby locations to individual blocks to make it easier for residents to purchase tokens. We have recently made a trial arrangement with the local convenience store in North Whitehawk for it to sell both washer and dryer tokens and, if successful, we will try to make similar agreements with other local stores where this helps residents.

We have again emptied the machines recently, and are finding only small numbers of tokens in them. Our own analysis is that the reason some locations are running out of tokens is because of the high numbers that have been purchased in batches. We understand that this is because some residents associations have made bulk purchases on behalf of tenants – because of the difficulties you have expressed in terms of getting to a library. While this is very helpful for some residents, it has also depleted stocks of both washer and dryer tokens very quickly.

We hope that once we're able to arrange for token machines in nearby locations, or local shops to sell the tokens, then access will be very much easier for residents. In the meantime, we are very grateful to our library colleagues for helping with the tokens and ensuring that we have been able to keep the laundrettes open without having cash on the premises.

Items from the North Residents Only Meeting 18/1/18

Installation of digital central heating thermostats

A tenant reported that K&T Heating are supplying residents with wireless digital central heating thermostats, but engineers have not received training in how to connect them to the boiler. Therefore, the wireless connection from the thermostat to the boiler is not being activated.

The tenant gave the example of her home. She had a new thermostat, but after the engineer left she was unable to turn her boiler off with the wireless thermostat.

She phoned Mears on a Friday to report the problem. This was not an emergency repair so K&T Heating did not come out until the following Wednesday. In the meantime she had to turn her boiler off manually as the house was getting hotter and hotter.

The engineer who attended could not resolve the problem, so it was reported again and a different engineer came out the following Monday. He said that the thermostat was faulty and replaced it. However, the problem persisted and the temperature in the house went up to 29°C.

Luckily, British Gas then came out to fit a new meter and explained that the wireless connection between the thermostat and the boiler had not been activated. They resolved the problem and the thermostat then worked fine.

Confirmation is requested that K&T heating engineers will all be trained in the installation of the new wireless digital thermostats.

Response: Nick Butler, K&T Heating, Branch Manager, Telephone: 01273 571521

I am sorry to hear about this tenant's experience. The digital thermostat used, comes pre-set by the manufacturers and is activated by the fully trained and qualified engineer after fitment. It cannot then be re-activated or altered. Brighton & Hove City Council, K&T Heating and the thermostat manufacture are aware that a few have developed a fault after fitment and testing. The manufacturer is supplying replacements however the thermostats have no serial number or any information to determine which units are affected. A faulty unit can only be identified if and when it fails so all heating engineers have been issued extra stock of the units to ensure a faulty unit is replaced as soon as it has been identified.

Repairs and problems with thermostats should be reported by calling the 24 hour Repairs Helpdesk on free phone 0800 052 6140 or our local number 01273 294409, or email us at BHCC.repairs@mearsgroup.co.uk

K&T Heating Out of Hours repairs service

The meeting felt that K&T Heating are not ensuring their out-of-hours staff are competent to carry out emergency repairs

An elderly resident in Moulsecomb reported that water was running down the wall from their boiler on 29th December 2017. A K&T engineer came out, but said he only installed boilers and couldn't repair them. The tenant therefore had to wait until 3rd January for another engineer to come out. In the meantime, the tenant had to turn their boiler off and was without heat or hot water for 5 days.

This is in contravention of the Repairs and Improvements Handbook, which states: "An emergency repair will be completed within 24 hours.... Examples include...no heating or hot water from boiler (November to April only)".

It is requested that K&T Heating advise what action they are taking to ensure that staff carrying out emergency repairs are competent to carry them out.

Response: Nick Butler, K&T Heating, Branch Manager, Telephone: 01273 571521

Thank you for raising this matter. Only fully qualified repair engineers attend day to day and out of hour's repairs. All repair engineers are issued with a van stock of replacement heating components. Van stocks are continuously monitored and updated to ensure they include the most commonly used parts to ensure a first time fix. The enquiry states that the repair was reported over the Christmas period. If a replacement part was required that is not part of the van stock a repair may not have been possible due to supply chains being closed over the festive period. The appliance would have been made safe and temporary heating issued to the resident until the repair could be completed. The repairs and improvement handbook states "An emergency repair is one which needs to be carried out quickly to avoid danger to you or serious damage to the building. An emergency repair will be attended to within 24 hours so please be available to give access". All emergency repairs are attended to within 24 hours and 99% of these repairs are completed on the first visit.

