

Residents Questions for Area Panel November 2020

3 Star (★★★) Items

Central, West, North and East

1. Communal Aerials

Some residents have reported that they are no longer able to use their Sky subscriptions with the communal aerials due to a compatibility issue. The communal system does not support Sky's 'Q Box', however Sky is now transitioning all customers to the Q Box. How will Housing ensure that residents can continue to use the communal aerials with the new system.

Response

Miles Davidson | Housing Sustainability Manager & Interim Mechanical & Electrical Team Manager | Housing Strategy & Property & Investment

We are aware of this issue and have been working to resolve it for some time. We had a few meetings with Sky initially to try to resolve the issue but after an initial phase of upgrades they stopped working with and funding our own contractors to enable completion of upgrade works in our blocks, hence some of the communal blocks having been upgraded and others not. We have asked Sky in the past to not sell the Sky Q package to residents in blocks where the communal systems could not support it, as the resident would not be able to benefit from the enhanced service.

We are aware that they are now planning on moving all customers over to Sky Q and of the issues this causes many residents who are Sky customers.

We have asked our communal digital aerial contractor to carry out a survey on all blocks to confirm which are SkyQ compatible and where any upgrade works are required. We are now willing to allow our contractors to complete these works. The survey has been completed in the last week and we are in the process of working up a programme of upgrades, to include costs, to carry out these upgrade works over the next few months. This being a 'new' programme of work will need to be approved internally before we are able to proceed.

EAST

2. Estate Development Budget (EDB): Allocation of surplus funds

An email sent to residents on 5th August stated:

"If you are in the West or North area of the city, and have an idea for a main bid, contact our team ASAP as we have funds left over for extra projects this financial year."

However, when there was money left over in the East budget, this was not re-offered to residents in the East area, but was put back into the citywide pot of money.

*It was recognised that there could be surplus EDB funds for two different reasons:
due to insufficient bids to allocate all the funds
due to the final cost to the Council being lower than the original estimates (this can happen when work is to a block of flats and leaseholders have to make a contribution to the costs)*

Why were the surplus funds for East area reallocated back to the central budget, but surplus funds for North and West areas re-offered out for work in those areas?

Response

Sam Warren – Community Engagement Manager

Over the past few year, we have learnt from listening to the concerns of residents around underspend and funds going back into the overall pot. Residents have told us this seems unfair on specific area, so we are now trying to implement some recommendations that were made in the review.

The EDB review recommended that there was a second round of main bids – one in April and one in October. This is the first year we have been able to trial this and only for North and West as the other area spent the full allocation of EDB in the April round.

If this is implemented in full next year it would mean capping the amounts spent in round one by 50% to allow for a second round for each area. Any underspend in round one would be carried over into round two for each area.

In the review this was recommended as a better system to prevent the loss of underspend as it cannot be carried over to the next financial year. Therefore, two rounds of main bids increase that opportunities for residents to spend all the EDB funds each year.

3. EDB publicity

The Council's publicity for EDB implies that the Council will fund 100% of EDB work and makes no reference to the potential charges to leaseholders.

However, when work is done to a block, the leaseholders in the block have to pay a proportion of the costs (depending on the nature of the work).

It is proposed that the Council's EDB publicity be amended to include reference to potential charges for leaseholders when work is done to their blocks.

Response

Thank you for pointing out this error we will amend the flyers with a line that states that some 'works may incur charges to leaseholders'

4. Distribution of Homing In

The Council started to post the Homing In magazines out in biodegradable sleeves. This appears to be an environmentally friendly move, but for the many residents living in flats without access to composting, there is no option but to put them in the usual landfill bins. They also can't be put into plastic recycling.

It was felt that using the biodegradable sleeves is probably less environmentally friendly than it appears.

It is proposed that the Council consider alternative options for the posting of Homing In, such as paper envelopes.

Response to Follow.

CENTRAL

5. Vermin control

Recent bed bug and plaster beetle infestations at Essex Place and of mice and rats at Highcroft Lodge have highlighted problems with vermin control:

Response

Eddie Wilson | General Manager | Housing Services

The vermin control team is chronically short-staffed. Essex Place were told there was a 6-week wait before they could do the first spraying.

The team have confirmed the diary is full, but only for the next ten days and not six weeks, so we are not sure why this was said to the residents.

There has not been any notification sent to other flats in Essex Place that there is a bed-bug problem.

We do not know where this came from, but we suspect it came from a tenant. It has the potential to cause bullying and create unnecessary fear and concern for tenants who don't have bedbugs. We have suggested a letter to go on the noticeboard at Essex Place, asking tenants to call Pest Control if they suspect they have them. However, we are not sure who would be responsible for creating this document.

Residents face a real battle getting the council to recognise that vermin infestation in blocks of flats is the responsibility of the council, not of the

individual resident. Housing needs to work with residents sensitively around infestations.

We have re-issued the Handout (19A) which states that communal area are the responsibility of BHCC.

Residents who need re-housing during vermin clearance have been given unsuitable accommodation (e.g. no proper disabled access) and offered accommodation in Windsor Court where there is a known bed-bug infestation. Living with vermin infestations causes considerable distress to residents and exposes them to a health risk. It is particularly problematic during a period when people are confined to their homes and for people who have disabilities. Agreed. Unfortunately, we don't always know the severity of tenant disabilities.

There have been three bedbug jobs raised for Essex Place. We have no knowledge of a plaster beetle infestation at Essex Place but we expect this is from 87 reporting that they had an unidentified insect in the property. Pest Control reported that they were not bedbugs and no further action was taken.

Highcroft Lodge was attended to on 3/7/2020 but no follow ups were done. We have emailed the Team Leader in Pest Control asking her to chase it up.

NORTH

6. Repairs hotline (North and West Combined)

There are major problems with reporting repairs and getting repairs done.

It was agreed that this issue was not addressed satisfactorily at the Area Panel.

- *It is difficult to report repairs as the phone lines are not working. A reliance on on-line reporting discriminates against those without internet access.*
- *Tenants are still not able to talk to repairs staff on the phone. When they phone the repairs line they still get a recorded message, which hasn't changed since March, stating they should leave a message or report the repair by email/online.*
- *Once repairs are reported, responses are slow and communication very poor. There is no system for informing people when repairs are done, so residents continue to pursue repairs after they have been completed.*
- *There is a growing backlog of repairs, with no clear indication of when or how these will be dealt with. Meanwhile, residents are living with the consequences.*

At the September Area Panel, the response given to a question about the repairs phone line re-opening (page 69, 6a – excerpt below) seemed to suggest that the solution to the problem of lots of residents needing repairs was to close the phone lines.

*“The Repairs Helpdesk staff that transferred to the council are relatively new and are still undergoing training and supervision. We are currently recruiting 4 new call agents to join the team and they will also need training and supervision support. This, together with the recruitment of resources in the Response Teams, means that **the repairs phone lines cannot be opened yet due to the risk of a major increase in job requests that would be very difficult to process and manage at present.**”*

- *While problems have been made worse by COVID 19, many of these issues were already present and have been raised by residents over a long period.*

This means that tenants have no confidence that their repairs will be dealt with.

Two examples were given:

- *A tenant in Dunster Close phoned to report an emergency repair as they had a leak. They received a text stating “Your message has been received”. They then didn’t receive any further communication and nobody attended. Luckily they were able to find and turn off their own stopcock, but if they hadn’t been able to do this there would have been major water damage to their home.*
- *A tenant in The Crestway reported that her toilet cistern was falling off the wall. It was reported as an emergency and she was told that somebody would come out. This didn’t happen and the tenant was unable to turn off the stopcock because it was too stiff. Three weeks later the cistern fell off the wall causing major flood damage to the property.*

It is requested that the repairs hotline be reinstated as a matter of urgency so tenants can report repairs and be given information on their progress.

Response

Eddie Wilson | General Manager | Housing Services

The repairs helpdesk went back into operation on 14 September. Training is ongoing for the new members of staff and is going well. We are now taking all calls from residents and logging their repairs directly onto the system. There is a backlog of repairs which we are continuing to work through, the speed of which is linked to further recruitment of trade staff to increase resource levels.

Repairs: accountability

There is no accountability for broken commitments about when work will be done. The time and effort that residents’ put into preparing for work on an agreed date (for example, making sure an area is clear so undergrowth can be cut back) is wasted. Residents’ then spend time chasing it up and ensuring completion of the job.

It was agreed that:

- a) It was agreed to ask for a report on the backlog of repairs and the ability of the repairs service to respond.***

- b) Communication about repairs must be improved and residents kept properly informed.**
- c) There needs to be a system of accountability to ensure work is done when agreed, and that there are consequences if commitments are broken. One aspect of this is a change in attitude in the Council from a culture where it is assumed residents can be inconvenienced and let down without any consequence.**

Response

Eddie Wilson | General Manager | Housing Services

At the time of writing we have 3,683 live jobs on the system, of which 2,208 jobs were reported prior to September. We have been working on the backlog of repairs. When residents contact the repairs helpdesk either by telephone or email we update them on the anticipated timescale to complete their repair, or if it has become more urgent we will make an appointment with them to attend to the repair.

In line with other providers across the country there has become a significant of repairs which we are working through, but it is anticipated that it will take in excess of six months to catch up, dependent on any further lockdowns and the speed at which we can recruit the desired calibre of staff.

7. Grass cutting and grounds maintenance

Following concerns raised by North and West areas, a written response to the September Area Panel stated that the full service for grass cutting and grounds maintenance had now resumed.

However, the experience of residents is that this service has not resumed. Residents feel that the grass is becoming overgrown and isn't being cut often enough. Weeds are also growing in the gaps between paving slabs, causing a trip hazard.

There were concerns about the poor service before Covid 19 and this has now just been exacerbated.

It was proposed that an urgent resumption of Estate Inspections would help to identify and resolve areas of key concern.

It is proposed that Estate Inspections, with residents and Field Officers present, be scheduled as soon as possible.

Response to Follow.

8. Communication between the Council and residents

Residents are very unclear about

- which council services are running and which aren't
- which council offices are open and which staff are back working in the offices
- who to contact in the council when they have an issue

The answer machine message residents get when they phone the council has not changed since the beginning of the Covid 19 period. There is also limited information on the council's website.

There has also been insufficient communication with tenant representatives. Representatives are often the eyes and ears of the Council on estates and have a wealth of knowledge that they are happy to share. They are often aware of those who are vulnerable or need help. However, they have not been given information about who to contact and how to share this information.

It is proposed that the council urgently provide up-to-date information on the location of officers and service delivery to tenant reps and to residents in general.

Response to follow.

9. Tenancy termination following a tenant's death

When a tenant dies their relatives are given a very short period of time to empty all their belongings and personal items from their home. This often doesn't take into account the fact that the tenant may have lived in the property for most of their adult life, or the grief that their loved ones are experiencing.

This policy seems to be in contrast to the extended periods of time that some properties are left empty between the termination of one tenancy and the commencement of the next.

The report at the Area Panel stated the average turnaround for empty properties is 20 days. However, Residents are aware of the length of time some local properties are empty, which is often significantly longer than the average figure.

- a. It is requested that information be provided to the next Area Panel listing all properties that have been empty for more than three months in the last year and the reasons for this.
- b. It is also proposed that the procedures for terminating tenancies so quickly after a tenant's death take into account the circumstances of the deceased tenants and those who are clearing their home.

Response to follow.

10. Gardening scheme for elderly and disabled tenants

It seems that some disabled tenants are receiving help from this scheme and others are not. There was concern that some people are not receiving the help they are entitled to, possibly because they don't know about the scheme.

The meeting felt that more information was needed on the criteria for receiving help from the gardening scheme, and that more publicity needs to be done so that everybody is aware of it.

Information is requested on the criteria for the Gardening Scheme and what publicity is carried out to ensure all tenants are aware of it.

Response to follow.

WEST

11. Equipment to support virtual communication

At the Area Panel it was mentioned that there are some tablets and other equipment available from the Community Engagement Team.

It was requested that information on this, the criteria and how residents can apply for it is sent to the Chair of every Residents Association.

Response

Sam Warren – Community Engagement Manager

The Community Engagement Team are purchasing a small number of tablets (max 10) that will be able to be loaned out to residents on a short term basis at 3-month periods. In the first instance these will be loaned to residents without access to digital equipment that are already representatives on groups and panels, so they are able to engage in online meetings. The CEO's will be working with the residents to ensure they are able to access some training to use the tablets. Residents will be asked to sign a loan agreement. We are not planning to widely advertise this scheme as there are very few tablets available however the CEO's will be speaking to TRA's and groups directly to share this information. In the longer term we will be encouraging group to apply to EDB and other funds to purchase digital equipment for their group as this is more sustainable and gives the group more ownership over how they share and use this.

12. Estate Development Budget (EDB) Review

Disruption due to COVID 19 meant the resident group reviewing EDB was not able to finish its work. A paper has been written by officers, but not yet discussed with the EDB review group or put to Area Panels. It was agreed that this needs to happen before the EDB review paper is put to the Housing Committee.

It was asked for a report on plans for finishing the EDB review.

Response

Sam Warren – Community Engagement Manager

The EDB review paper came to the Involvement and Empowerment Service Improvement Group for discussion in March 2020. The draft Tenant and Leaseholder Engagement Strategy will include some actions to complete the implementation of the 2018 EDB review. Many actions have been implemented and are noted in detail in Appendix 3 of the Tenant and Leaseholder Engagement Strategy report within the

November Area Panel agenda. This is a draft report and will be presented at all Area Panels and November Involvement and Empowerment Service Improvement Group for consultation prior to Housing Committee in January.

If you would like to share your thoughts and idea on this, please contact me using the details below

13. EDB work progress report and update of future works (North and West)

The EDB work agreed in April 2020 does not yet seem to have started.

There is outstanding, agreed EDB work, some of it dating back to 2018.

A report was requested looking at:

- a) When Estate Development Budget work will re-start*
- b) A schedule of planned, incomplete and outstanding work*

This will be covered by Keith Perry and Kay Atherton in the EDB Update item that is on the agenda

2 Star (★★) Items EAST

14. September Area Panel

At the East breakout meeting on 1st October there needs to be a discussion on all 2 star items plus the 3 star item of 'Water Ingress to Houses in Woodingdean'.

Response to be given at Area Panel.

