

**REPORT OF THE HOUSING AND URBAN RENEWAL OVERVIEW AND  
SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

**WINTER PREPAREDNESS**

**1. INTRODUCTION**

- 1.1 In January 2011 a written question was raised at Council with the then Chair of the Housing and Urban Renewal Overview and Scrutiny Committee. It expressed concern about the number of complaints received over Christmas regarding failed heating and hot water systems. The Committee was requested to explore the extent and cause of the problems, as well as the response to them. At the time the Committee Chair made reassurances that this issue would be examined and indeed a close eye on the performance of the repairs and maintenance contractors has been maintained by the Committee.
- 1.2 Over the last few months the Housing and Urban Renewal Overview and Scrutiny Committee has considered in detail what happened during the severe weather period last year. Members felt that all Councillors should hear about what has been done to resolve these past problems. This report summarises the Committee's findings and explores how partners will continue to work together going forward.

**2. BACKGROUND**

- 2.1 From late November 2010 through to January 2011 snow was on the ground and at its worst, night time temperatures were between minus 12C & minus 18C. The extreme weather event led to an unprecedented number of calls from Council Housing tenants to the Contact Centre. The majority were reporting problems with heating systems as they failed in the cold weather and then burst pipes as the thaw set in.
- 2.2 The Housing and Urban Renewal O&S Committee received a detailed report in July 2011 on the impact on council tenants of the severe winter weather occurrence and has sought assurances that issues experienced by tenants in getting resolution to problems, will not be repeated.
- 2.3 Information presented to the Committee highlighted the difficult circumstances experienced last winter. Data gathered identified that from November 2010 through to the end of January 2011, 182,631 housing repair calls were received by the Contact Centre; a 34% increase on the previous year. Calls peaked on the 20th, 21st and 22nd of December 2010, with an average of 7,200 calls received each day, five times the normal daily call rate.
- 2.4 The Council's gas contractors worked hard to keep up with this demand. In comparison to other private sector gas servicing companies, anecdotal evidence shows that the Council contractors performed well, with the majority of call outs attended within 2/3 days at the height of the severe weather event, compared to the private sector taking on average 5/7 days. Although 29,504 jobs were completed by the contractors between November 2010 to the end of January 2011, there were a number of problems that need to be resolved to avoid heating systems failing and manage any future rise in demand during the winter months.

### **3. WHAT CAUSED THE PEAK IN DEMAND?**

#### **Failure of the Condensing Boiler**

3.1 As part of both the Government's and Council's aim to cut carbon emissions and ensure Decent Homes, the Council has provided 23,000 new boilers in Council Homes since 2005. Many of these boilers are condensing boilers, which have been fitted with an external condensing pipe, in accordance with the manufacturer's specification. In the extreme cold weather these external condensate pipes froze, stopping the boilers from functioning. This was a common problem across the county with thousands of condensing boilers failing, leading to increased demand for boiler repairs and parts. To cope with this demand in Birmingham in last December's peak, the two hour target response time to emergency calls was changed to two days. This highlights the strain that was placed on the contractors to undertake repairs and their inability to do so within the desired timeframe. Members will recall the transport gridlock and difficult driving conditions.

#### **Lack of communication**

3.2 Although during this period the high level of demand on the Contact Centre was mainly due to the failure of boilers in the cold weather, there were a number of processes which made the situation worse. The Co-ordinating Overview and Scrutiny Committee has recently been examining Customer Services as a whole and has identified some systemic failures in the way that Council tenants, the Contact Centre and the contractors were communicating with one another.

3.3 A key problem identified, was that customers often needed to call back for a range of reasons after originally reporting a repair. For example if the contractor could not get access to the property when they called to undertake a repair, the job was then cancelled on the system. Tenants then had to call back to make a new appointment. In other cases repeat calls were made as contractors were delayed in completing the job as they were unable to get the parts needed to fix the boilers (there was a national shortage of some parts) or, they could only partly complete the job on the first visit as the engineer did not have the skills to check the safety of the appliance or fit a new boiler as well as undertake the repair. Tenants had to call the Contact Centre repeatedly to re-book appointments or find out when the second visit to complete the repair would take place. To add to confusion, in some cases the same repair job was being logged repeatedly on the system and passed onto the contractors.

3.4 An analysis of a snapshot of calls in relation to gas and heating enquiries by Service Birmingham identified that up to 45% of callers requested additional information or made general enquiries. Of these calls, 44% were made as a result of contractors failing to keep an appointment, or the tenant being advised to call the Contact Centre by the contractors.

3.5 It was reported to the Committee that the Council's Contact Centre was placed under immense pressure during the winter period, which was exacerbated by the numbers of staff who were unable to get to work when snow was on the ground. The average call answering time for this period was circa 17 minutes.

#### **4. COMBATING THE PROBLEMS**

- 4.1 In February 2011 a working group made up of Senior Housing Officers, gas contractors and elected Members, including the Vice Chairman of the Housing and Urban Renewal Overview and Scrutiny Committee, was set up to examine what could be learnt from the experiences of last winter. The group met on five occasions and identified a number of actions to mitigate problems in the future, these are discussed below. Tenants were also fully consulted on the actions being discussed.

##### **Making boilers less vulnerable to the cold**

- 4.2 The Council was the only Local Authority to visit Worcester Bosh to seek advice from the manufacturer on what action could be taken to avoid external condensate pipes freezing. Following the manufacturer's revised guidance the Council is re-installing condensate pipes that were fitted externally, internally. The Council plans to complete this work by early December 2011 to minimise the risk of the pipes freezing again this winter. In addition, a campaign was launched via Letterbox in September 2011 raising awareness of this issue and advising tenants about the best way to use their boilers and prevent them breaking down.
- 4.3 For those properties where it is not possible to move the pipes internally to stop them freezing a product called 'Condensulate' will be used. This is an insulated pipe that is fitted internally to the external condensing pipe. In the meantime the scripts that are used by the Contact Centre staff have also been reviewed and updated so that where appropriate, tenants can receive advice on how to thaw the pipes themselves when safe to do so rather than having to wait for an engineer to undertake this often simple task.

##### **Responding to an increased volume of calls**

- 4.4 To cope with an increased demand over the winter period Service Birmingham staffing levels have been reviewed to ensure there are enough staff to take calls at peak times. To protect customers who may be in a short queue, free phone' numbers have been put in place to ensure that calls to the Contact Centre made from mobile phones are not charged at a premium rate. Importantly, the 'vulnerability' criteria has also been examined and finalised to ensure that resources are directed in the first instance to those in most need. The escalation process which can be triggered by Officers has also been reviewed.

##### **Solving problems efficiently**

- 4.5 Service Birmingham has analysed repair request queries and shared their findings with the Council. To prevent duplicate contacts by tenants, the contractors have each increased the amount of multi skilled operatives within their workforce to ensure that operatives have the skills to complete the entire repair job in one go, rather than the tenant having to wait for another suitably skilled operative to finish the job on a separate occasion. This should help reduce the delay in completing jobs and the need for tenants to re-book, chase up or check on appointments with the Contact Centre. Any jobs that are still in progress over seven days are now identified in a weekly analysis of jobs outstanding and can therefore be made a priority and responded to. For those repairs that are more technical, the Council has worked with contractors to ensure that the highest used boiler parts have been identified to ensure that the

stock on the contractors vans is what is required. This should also ensure that problems can be fixed more frequently on the first visit. All three gas contractors now have a 100% use of hand held computers, which means they can update their records and order parts in 'real time'. Partners now also all share access to Customer Relations Management information so that all in the loop are aware of progress on repairs as they happen and avoiding the creation of duplicate repair requests. In addition a full reconciliation of gas data has taken place to ensure that the Council has better asset management information.

## **5. RESOLVING ANY ISSUES THAT CONSTITUENTS MAY EXPERIENCE**

- 5.1 If Councillors are approached by tenants with housing repair issues, they should contact the Contact Centre on 0800 073 3333 or textphone 0121 678 5343 (for people who are deaf or hard of hearing). Repairs can also be requested online at:  
<http://www.birmingham.gov.uk/repairs>
- 5.2 If a tenant has reported a repair and this has not been resolved to their satisfaction they can register their complaint by filling in the online form which has a link to it on the above webpage or by contacting the following numbers, depending on the ward in which they live.  
Central - 0121 464 4903    North - 0121 303 1802    South - 0121 303 6981
- 5.3 If Councillors have concerns about any work carried out on a property or would like to speak to someone within the Homes and Neighbourhoods Directorate about any of the contractors or the response from the Contact Centre, you are advised to email Bob Brown, Service Director Central Housing Services.

## **6. CONCLUSION**

- 6.1 The severe weather experienced during last winter in the city and the problems with boilers that arose as a result of the extremely cold conditions put huge strains on the both the Contact Centre and repairs contractors ability to respond to unprecedented levels of demand for their services. In turn this also exposed some areas of weakness in how the overall system was working for processing tenant requests for repairs from first contact to completion of the work. However, there has been significant effort made by all concerned to find solutions both to the initial problem relating to the boiler as well as to address the smooth operation of the wider processes so that tenants do not face the same difficulties in future should the same severe weather conditions be repeated this year.
- 6.2 The Housing and Urban Renewal Overview and Scrutiny Committee will continue to monitor the Council's performance in this area and scrutinise how lessons learnt from last winter are put in place this year.

### **MOTION**

**That the City Council supports the preparations made for next winter which the Executive has put in place and asks that the Housing and Urban Renewal Committee reviews the effectiveness of these actions during the spring of 2012.**