

“First Contact” – i.e. phoning the Repairs Contact Centre **(and consideration of Emergency Repairs prioritisation)**

Summary

We undertook a review of the Repairs Contact Centre (RCC) phone call handling process, along with a secondary look into how emergencies are handled. Calls are dialled in by residents to 0800 952 5555, which has a single-level menu with 3 options. This review does *not* cover the many wider aspects of repairs, such as damp & mould, or how repairs are carried out. Such topics may be dealt with in future reviews.

Context

This is the first report of the residents’ **Repairs Panel**. The panel’s potential subject matter covers **all kinds of repairs and maintenance, from minor to those involving whole blocks**. Newham Council’s long name for these panels is *Performance Review & Improvement* (PR&I) Panels.

The Repairs Panel is one of 4 such panels intended by the Council, to be set up in accordance with its 2021 [Resident Involvement Strategy](#) (which is way behind the schedule set up for it in their [Action Plan for it – it’s on page 4 of this 2022 update](#)). This strategy was largely a consequence of government pressure, as a result of the Grenfell Tower disaster in 2017. The seriousness of that fire is widely considered to have been seriously contributed to by a failure of the authorities to engage with, and listen to their residents. This led to the Social Housing Regulation Act 2023.

The Council decided to set these Panels up with the idea that each Panel conducts several projects (or investigations or reviews) a year, of a *particular aspect* of (in our case) repairs, and make a report on each.

The Repairs Panel began in May 2023, and has been the only such Panel in existence (until now - November 2024 - when the Neighbourhood Management one is starting soon). We are a group of 7 concerned residents in Newham’s council housing – 6 council tenants, and 1 leaseholder in a council-owned block. Most of us work full-time, so have scarce time to devote to this work. Applications for further members are welcome – please contact the Council’s Resident Involvement team at getinvolved.housing@newham.gov.uk, or its manager, Simon Ware, on 020 3373 8743, to discuss it.

Towards the end of this project, the council’s housing department received a highly critical report from the regulator – see final section of *this* report.

Abbreviations

PR&I Performance Review & Improvement (this is the scrutiny system by Panels of council residents, like our Repairs one)

LBN London Borough of Newham (but you really should know that one!)

RCC Repairs Contact Centre (where you get through to on dialling 0800 952 5555, provided you do it during office hours)

RMS Repairs & Maintenance Service (the whole repairs organisation)

ICT Information & Communication Technology (the part of the Council responsible for all computer systems – not itself part of Housing)

How the topic was chosen

The first topic we began dealing with, at the Council's invitation, was to help shape the new online repairs reporting part of their new "Portal" for residents of all LBN-owned housing. (There is already an online method for reporting repairs [excluding emergencies], but it is difficult to use, and fiddly to sign up to in the first place.) The new system was originally intended to come on line in early 2024, but this has been delayed.

The Panel discussed our priority subject for the current review. Various topics were suggested:

- Priority of repairs
- Communal repairs
- Damp and Mould Taskforce
- Major Works
- Initial contact with contact centre
- "First time fix" (avoidance of repeat visits for one repair)
- Sub-contracting
- Quality Control

We felt our top 3 would be **initial contact with contact centre** (RCC), **"first time fix"**, and **sub-contractors**. And decided, at our November 2023 meeting, to focus on the contact centre for our first review, later extended to discuss how it handles emergency repair prioritisation. The topic was chosen due to recurring concerns raised by residents regarding the effectiveness and efficiency of the current call handling process.

Our Investigation

Meetings and liaison with other staff were arranged by **Simon Ware, Resident Involvement Manager**, who assisted us throughout.

The Repairs PR&I panel began the review by submitting general questions about RCC based on our experience prior to the meetings.

The panel had two formal meetings with staff to cover such things as:

- RCC Team Structure
- Understand the roles and responsibility of the contact centre
- Incoming call data
- Type of call they receive
- Current process
- How residents can raise a job – during this period the Council introduced the option to be phoned back instead of hanging on. This is welcome.
- What is an emergency repair?
- Response times
- Staff training

Apart from Simon, we met with the following face-to-face, with some Panel members joining online:

- Umarfaruk Ahmed, now overall Head of Resident Engagement, which includes RCC; and he is Simon's manager
- Mihat Hussain, an RCC Team Leader at the time
- Christopher Sussex, RMS Supervisor/On-call Manager

- Michael Thayne, Transformation Senior Project Manager, dealing with Housing, esp. repairs prioritisation

At the meetings information was presented, and discussed with us. Follow-up questions were responded to via email too. The topic was extensively discussed at our meetings in February, May, and July, 2024.

We tried some “Mystery Shopping” (pretending to need a repair). Some of us, after signing up to secrecy, were each able to listen in to a couple of incoming calls from residents, and ask staff questions.

We then gave a list of Feedback points (several pages below), which the repairs service has been considering. In some cases they have already indicated their reaction, and given dates for implementation (see table towards end).

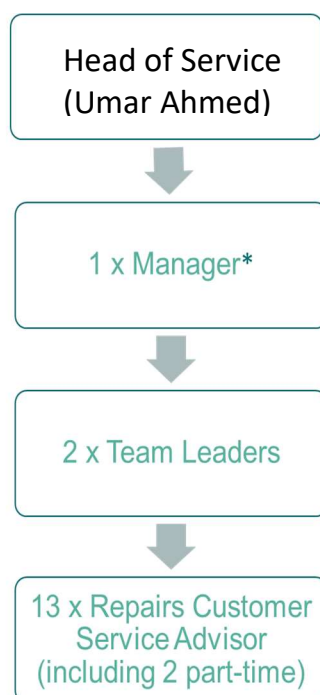
Information from Newham Housing Services via Presentations & Discussions

NB1: RCC times are 9-5 Mon-Fri (0800 952 5555).

NB2: The [existing online system](#) for reporting routine repairs (not emergencies) generates an email which is dealt with later. But you have to sign up to it first. An improved (‘repairs portal’) system is due soon.

NB3: Routine repairs can also be requested by emailing HSG-repair.request@newham.gov.uk but they don’t advertise this!

RCC Team Structure at Summer 2024



The RCC team comprises of 17 members of staff, and had 2 members of full-time staff on long-term sick.

* The manager role was vacant at the time, since filled, and 1 team leader position is now vacant.

Transfer of Call-handling from Main Council Switchboard to within Housing Itself

We know that from long before the Panel was set up, there had been much criticism of the system for residents phoning in repair needs, including due to staff not being very informed. The calls were being answered by staff dealing with calls across all Council services. So between

November 2022 and February 2023 this was transferred in stages to Bridge Road Depot, where Repairs and Maintenance Services (RMS) staff are, to improve access to guidance and information on repairs which often need close collaboration with repairs managers, supervisors and planners.

So, we reckon, residents who have been put off trying to get repairs done before, should hopefully have found staff more clued-up since this transfer of responsibilities.

An immediate improvement to call waiting times is reported (average time in June 2023 was one minute!), though this has declined since. It was 22 minutes in January 2024 (of which 2/3 were given up on before it was answered), but we have been unable to obtain figures for other months by the time of writing.

“Dashboard”

The phone system was changed to being provided by Ring Central in May 2023. This shows the call-handlers etc a screen which gives much information including the length of the queue, current waiting time, & calls handled so far that day.

Examples of Type of call received

New appointment queries 0800 952 5555 Option 2

- Boiler issues
- Flooring
- Painting
- Electrical issues

Follow-on for a job raised 0800 952 5555 Option 3

- A job which has already been raised and residents are asking for an update. Example: if the materials have arrived or if the appointment can be done any earlier.

Emergency queries 0800 952 5555 Option 1

- Emergency jobs are attended to within 4-6 hours and requires management approval before being sent out.
- Example of an emergency? Water which is flooding the property or effecting the electricity in the property

Emergency Response Repair Service

Newham Policy classifies **emergency repairs** as:

Repairs that need to be carried out to avoid serious danger to the health and safety of the occupants or where a failure to carry out the repair could cause extensive damage to buildings and property.

RMS should attend within 4 hours (if during daytime) and complete the repair within 24 hours.

The Council provides an emergency repairs service on the same number, outside of normal working hours, which is available 365 days per year including 24 hours a day at weekends and during public holidays. (Call management is provided by Delta 1.) [But there may be problems with availability of some trades on some days.]

- Note, on an '**Out of Hours**' call out the general approach is one of '**attend & make safe**', which they aim to do within 4 hours. [There is some uncertainty about *targets* outside RMS hours, which may be dealt with in a future review.] The operative should then identify the follow-on work required & submit an update to the back office, who on the next working day, should raise & arrange a visit for the full repair to be undertaken at a convenient time.
- As an example, on a broken window attendance, the operative would likely remove the broken glass & board up (safety aspects). They would likely measure up the replacement required, submit the report to the back office, who the next working day should arrange a glazier to attend & replace the window)

A couple of slides which summarise this are below:

What is classed as an emergency?



Water going into electrics	Leaks/flooding of properties which cannot be contained	Smell of Gas	Security Risk – Front entrance / ground floor windows cannot be closed
Fall Risk from windows – young children / vulnerable person lives at address	No water throughout property – Thames water checks to be made.	Upsurge of waste	Overflowing communal drains
Dangerous sockets or fittings	Total loss of power – checks to be carried out first	Total loss of heating/hot water during winter months	Full board taps [seems to mean kitchen taps or drinking water]

What is not classed as an emergency?



Outside of the emergency category, we use the following schedules:

- **Urgent:** raised on a 3 or 7 day schedule, depending on the nature of the work required
- **Routine:** raised on a 20 day schedule and considered non-urgent
- **Planned:** raised on a 42 day schedule, usually work that is required for the long term good of the property & may be grouped together and & be carried out as part of a programme of work

Washing lines	Shower curtains/rails	Leaks that can be contained	Guttering leaks
Slow draining sinks	Windows that cannot be opened	Stiff doors	Tap not working low pressure
Lost power to only some sockets	No heating in summer	TV signal not working	Lighting in property or communal area (one light)

Resident Panel Feedback (Recommendations or ideas or expectations)

General

- A1. If residents have a specific medical condition then it is important to take that into account with the priority of certain repairs which may make a greater impact on their health and wellbeing.
- A2. Could reporting via WhatsApp be an option to enable residents to easily share photos with Repairs?
- A3. If context provided does that impact on the priority of repairs?
- A4. Repeat repairs should have higher prioritisation
- A5. Training for contact centre staff
- A6. Online portal needs to be inclusive (for those with a range of sensory needs)
- A7. Part-time staff e.g. 1 or 2 just working Mondays &/or day after bank holiday or bad weather should be facilitated/encouraged, to help cope when large demand. &/or annual leave discouraged on Monday/day after bank holiday
- A8. The ability to *book* a repair, including an emergency, or a gas repair, is not to be prevented, e.g. on account of that service not being in a position to *execute* the repair within a certain time.
- A9. It should not be possible for staff to delete a repair phone call report (or fail to log it in the first place) without it leaving some trace.
- A10. Partitions should be provided between staff answering phones, to make the sound clearer & less confusing for callers (or they should work further apart in the meantime).
- A11. Staff answering phones should have diagram of property available onscreen, to help them understand what we're saying, as & when such facility is available.
- A12. Staff answering phones should have available onscreen pictures of e.g. different types of taps available, so staff can more easily understand what resident is talking about if they refer to particular types of tap by name.

Call-handlers' Script

- B1. On answering, staff must always give their name, clearly and not rushed.
- B2. *The following suggestion was rejected by the Panel: Staff answering may choose a (preferably short & familiar) name to be known as, so staff do not have a security concern about giving their real name. Existing staff who wish to avail themselves of this protection can arrange to change from their 'real' name (preferably in unison), but should then stick to that name. Other staff will need to be careful not to call them by their 'real' name when talking to them while phone lines are open. (To help remind staff, large name tags could be worn until they are habitually known as their new name.)*
- B3. For communal repairs (which currently do not result in the job number being automatically texted to the caller), the job number must be given or offered verbally to the caller, rather than only being given if caller thinks to ask for it.
- B4. If all lights out on a corridor, should be classified as emergency.

Phone System's Automatic Messages

- C1. If a significant part of the repairs operation is not working at a particular time (e.g. the "Northgate system"), that may affect whether there's much point in a caller from continuing to hold, then an appropriate temporary audio message is to be put near the beginning of the answerphone sequence, to alert callers to that fact.
- C2. Don't have early messages so quiet.
- C3. Don't have music quiet, especially with long pause at end, to make you lean in, before suddenly repeated loud message.

- C4. Don't have music distort, with the sound phasing out – this worries callers that the call may cut out.
- C5. Avoid repeatedly pestering us to go online - until there is a new system, then mention there's a new one, with some details.
- C6. Do say upfront how many in queue regardless, and repeat often
- C7. *The following suggestion was rejected by the Panel: Do if technologically possible say at beginning how many staff answering calls at the time, updated occasionally or if changes significantly.*
- C8. Do point out at beginning that it's same queue for all 3 options. (This is to deter callers from pressing '1' for Emergency in the false expectation of getting the call answered sooner.)
- C9. Do change message for option 2 to not imply it includes existing repairs. It currently says "... to request a new appointment", which you might press to request a new appointment for an existing repair that hasn't been addressed. It should say e.g. "... for an appointment for a new repair".
- C10. All changes to the automatic messages system to be run past Repairs Panel - before implementation if practical.
- C11. Wording of automatic texted confirmation/reminder should be changed to take into account how it comes out on landlines (the ref. no. is garbled currently), or possibly have different messages if technologically possible.

Website

- D1. Do have available online: changes to system messages etc. in previous 12 months, with date of change.
- D2. Website to include overview of how the messages sequence/etc operates. (If has multiple modes of operation, which one is in use today.)
- D3. Information also to be included: how many staff answering phones right now, and how many waiting right now, and some kind of estimate of waiting time.
- D4. Information on relative waiting times at different times of day
- D5. All such webpage changes are to be run by the Panel – before implementing if practicable.
- D6. The page(s) with the above information to be linked to wherever people might plausibly look for it.

Suggested Issues Beyond Contact Centre for dealing with in future Panel reviews

- Managers should be proactive where several appointments missed
- Does system show vulnerabilities? Should include information from Social Services, to avoid need to keep repeating disability needs. Are disabilities sufficiently taken into account?
- Need for respect and good conduct from all Newham operatives and external contractors.
- How does council monitor the standard of external contractors to see if they are consistently up to the required standard?
- Text survey after work done might not work for those with a Learning Disability where a familiar person may be better able to support them to provide a response.
- What happens where contractors leave a mess?
- Investigate root cause of repeat repairs of same thing
- Operatives taking unnecessary photos of home
- (Further to B4) do all appropriate repairs get classified as Emergencies?
- Why can't repair operative no-shows be acted on by RCC, by booking another appointment, not just passing on a message for someone to hopefully contact resident?
- Whether cherry-picker should be used more instead of scaffolding.

- The need to monitor ongoing repairs (during, after).
- How repair jobs are allocated to trades (fixed number per day?)

Action Plan Agreed already by LBN Housing

(This does not mean they've rejected the other recommendations.)

The Action Plan will be reviewed periodically by Panel & staff.

Third column gives refs. from Resident Panel Feedback section earlier.

Last 3 columns give the council's reported progress [with any Panel comments in square brackets]

	Issue raised by Panel		LBN Action/Response	By Whom	By when
1	Repair priority to take account of disability	A1	Where a repair issue may have a specific impact on a person with a disability then this is taken into account already	Head of Resident Engagement	Completed [We don't think they do so sufficiently, nor get information from Social Services]
2	Need for enhanced options to share photos with contact centre such as website or WhatsApp	A2	Online Portal being developed to include reporting repairs, which will allow uploading photos.	Transformation	January 2025 [is their latest projection at Nov 2024]
3	Higher priority if repeat repair	A4	Software change has been requested. Once in place will be able to identify these and set out approach on prioritisation.	Transformation	Unknown, as software provider does updates in batches
4	Ensure online reporting portal is accessible	A6	Ensure website has all best practice tools in terms of accessibility	Transformation / ICT	January 2025
5	Review RCC call-handler scripts noting the Feedback above from Panel	B1, B3, B4	To provide an updated call script to panel	Head of Resident Engagement / RCC Manager	New script created. Will be shared with the panel January 2025
6a	Change to give queue position regardless	C6			Changed - completed
6b	Change messages & music with regard to our points	C1- C5 & C8- C9	[Commitment so far is only to review]		
7	Ensure more staff on at peak times	A7	Adjust rotas to achieve this as far as possible within budgets.	Head of Resident Engagement / RCC Manager	January 2025 - Undertaken an exercise to recruit more staff and part-time agency

					staff to cover lunch breaks.
8	Put partitions in between desks in call centre to minimise background noise & for privacy	A10	Following discussion with the call handlers, they preferred the office space to be open as it is. Closing it off would make them feel claustrophobic.	Head of Resident Engagement / RCC Manager	Rejected – but they've provided new noise blocking headsets to staff, & partitions at end of rows of desks.
9	Provide communal repair reference	B3	Add this to the RCC call script.	Head of Resident Engagement / RCC Manager	Complete
10	Appropriate staff training programme required	A5 B1	To put in place and provide a summary of it to panel.	Head of Resident Engagement / RCC Manager	Comprehensive customer service training scheduled for December & January.
11a	Ensure website has guidance on what to expect when they call and the quietest times for calls.	D2 D4	Update repairs part of website to include relevant information incl. statistics.	Head of Resident Engagement / Comms (outside Housing)	Will be updated January 2025 [council's expectation]
11b	Other website-related recommendations	D1, D3, D5, D6	Will review.	as box above	
12	Don't delete record of call	A9	Cannot be deleted. [Yet some disappear!]. (Audio deleted after 1 year due to GDPR.)		

(Note: this means the council have not yet agreed at time of writing to action on our (A3,) A8, A11, A12, B4, C1-C5, C8-C9, C10, C11, D1, D3, D5, D6, but they have had limited time to decide so far.)

How this report was compiled

A provisional draft of this report was made by the Resident Involvement team in Housing Services. This was, understandably, written a bit like a council report, and from the council's point of view, where things (including us!) were put in a flattering light. We made extensive changes and additions, to make it more in our 'voice'.

Conclusion

Throughout the review process, the panel examined various aspects of the call handling procedures. Our investigations enabled us to supplement our extensive experience over the years, and we solicited input from other residents, to help us gain valuable insights into the current system. We also considered emergency repair prioritisation.

Key findings from the scrutiny exercise revealed several areas for improvement, such as the need for **enhanced staff training to better handle resident inquiries**, the need to **reduce wait times**, the establishment of **clearer communication channels for resident feedback and follow-up**,

and the need to **reduce the frequency of annoying automatic messages** (not the queue position!). It also considered alternative methods of reporting repairs.

The Panel's recommendations aim to improve the call handling process, contributing to what the council would call a more responsive and resident-focused approach. Ideally, this process would be the start of a trend for council services, towards enacting the slogan "**nothing about us without us**", which has long been used in the context of disability.

It is regrettable that it has taken 18 months before being in a position to release our first report. There have been delays on all sides, but the biggest reasons for this, are that the online system that our first project was based on, has been postponed by the council, and that the scope of current project has gradually increased during its progress. We will try to do better next time!

Regulator's Report

In October 2024, during our review, the Regulator of Social Housing (RSH) released its [report on Newham Council](#), awarding it the lowest of 4 grades (for its set of four types of [consumer standards](#)'), the only time this grade has been given, over the 35 social housing organisations it has reviewed in the 6 months of such reviews.

Their strongest criticisms involve the great number of **fire protection** actions outstanding, and points out LBN haven't been transparent with residents about this.

They were also very critical on **repairs**, and noted Newham Council reported that:

- Two-thirds of non-emergency repairs and 96% of emergency repairs were completed within target timescales;
- But there were around 5,400 open repairs, around a half being outside of target dates, some of which were from earlier than 2024.

And that LBN acknowledged that this area requires significant improvement.

The regulator is aware of the Panel (& spoke with us!) but regarding **involvement** said:

We found there were very limited meaningful opportunities for tenants to influence and scrutinise LB Newham's strategies, policies and services. LB Newham's resident involvement strategy is subject to review, and it is in the early stages of developing its tenant engagement structures. We saw some evidence that tenants are able to participate in tenant led activities and opportunities, although this is limited at this time. LB Newham acknowledges that this is an area that requires significant improvement.

That this report by the regulator was so damning, only emphasises the need for more numerous, more powerful, more flexible, and faster systems of accountability of those parts of the Council's housing department (and, by extension, the Council more generally!) to residents.

== END ==