

## **OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE 1 MARCH 2022**

**Report title:** Housing Communications and Portal

**Wards:** All

**Portfolio:** Cabinet Member for Housing and Homelessness, Councillor Maria Kay

**Report Authorised by:** Bayo Dosunmu, Strategic Director for Resident Services

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### **REPORT SUMMARY**

Lambeth Council, like many other local authorities and organisations, is going through a transitional period where it's reviewing its existing channels of communication and digital offer with the view to working closely with our residents to provide innovative solutions that meet both their current and future needs.

The report aims to respond to three questions:

1. Resident Portal and homeowner billing.
2. How do people communicate with the Council with regards to repairs, and bills for homeowners and tenants?
3. Customer call centre.

### **FINANCE SUMMARY**

There are no direct financial impacts arising as a consequence of this report.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

1. To note the contents of the paper and the activities being taken across Housing Services to enhance and complement our existing offer to residents.

## 1. CONTEXT

- 1.1 New technology enhancements being introduced within Housing Services, provide Lambeth residents with the ability to access information online about their property. It will allow our residents to access information in a way, and time, that suits them. The new technologies align with Lambeth's vision of affording residents' greater transparency, increased flexible engagement which is real-time and a streamlined service that empowers. This will have a significant positive impact on resident satisfaction, greater clarity on repairs and reduction of incoming calls, reduction of outgoing mass mailings and enquires.

## 2. PROPOSAL AND REASONS

- 2.1 Lambeth Council went live with MyHousingonline on 18 January 2021 for our tenants and on 19 April 2022 for homeowners.
- 2.2 Our aim was to deliver an enhanced customer experience for homeowners and tenants, enabled by a technology solution that complements existing channels:
- a. View and update contact details;
  - b. Set up a direct debit online/make payment;
  - c. View rent or service charge balances;
  - d. View all current and former accounts (where relevant);
  - e. View account details and payment schedules;
  - f. View account's transactions;
  - g. Download a PDF of rent/service charge statements;
  - h. Check benefit entitlements with our free confidential benefit calculator;
  - i. Request a refund if an account is in credit; and,
  - j. Report and track property repairs online.

### Customer Benefits

- 2.3 Following the implementation of the Housing Online Portal, the benefits to the resident are as follows:
- a. Making our services more accessible. The MyHousingonline portal gives our residents easy access to relevant information and the ability to engage with us at a time and location of their choosing;
  - b. Customers can see a history of their transactions in one place rather than viewing several paper statements;
  - c. Customers will be able to request a credit refund and receive payment within 2 weeks. Our previous time scales for processing a refund was six weeks;
  - d. Customer report and track property repairs online; and,
  - e. Most of the data on the portal is real-time (some transactions such as payments will appear the following day). The customers are seeing the same data we are, which creates transparency across services and transactions.

### Service Benefits

- 2.4 The service has been able to meet customer expectations by providing a digital service.
- f. We have seen an increase in capacity following a reduction in request for statements and associated phone calls/emails;
  - g. Customer satisfaction in Homeownership and Rents services remains strong;
  - h. Increased productivity through new ways of working; and,
  - i. Transparency

### Current progress

2.5 We have seen an unprecedented take up of homeowners & tenants signing up to the portal over the last 12 and 9 months respectively. Such was the success of the roll out that we were invited to do a Q&A at the UK NEC user group. We also have a further Q&A session at the UK Housing Technology conference, to talk through our approach and the successful engagement to date.

- a. Number of homeowner sign ups – **3176 out of 9,722**; and,
- b. Number Tenant sign ups – **13091 out of 23038**.

**Table 1 – monthly sign-ups**

<b>2021</b>	<b>Homeowner</b>	<b>Tenants</b>	<b>Total</b>
Jan	0	77	<b>77</b>
Feb	1	3155	<b>3156</b>
Mar	43	1711	<b>1754</b>
Apr	555	799	<b>1354</b>
May	825	361	<b>1186</b>
Jun	358	3222	<b>3580</b>
Jul	391	1358	<b>1749</b>
Aug	224	669	<b>893</b>
Sep	90	421	<b>511</b>
Oct	244	294	<b>538</b>
Nov	193	317	<b>510</b>
Dec	90	301	<b>391</b>
<b>2022</b>			
Jan	132	305	<b>437</b>
Feb	30	60	<b>90</b>
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>3176</b>	<b>13091</b>	<b>16267</b>

**Table 2 – Ward Breakdown**

BISHOPS WARD	669
BRIXTON HILL WARD	876
CLAPHAM COMMON WARD	714
CLAPHAM TOWN WARD	906
COLDHARBOUR WARD	1341
FERNDALE WARD	542
GIPSY HILL WARD	979
HERNE HILL WARD	440
KNIGHTS HILL WARD	727
LARKHALL WARD	1074
OUT OF BOROUGH WARD	29
OVAL WARD	432
PRINCES WARD	1301
ST LEONARDS WARD	192
STOCKWELL WARD	639
STREATHAM HILL WARD	761
STREATHAM SOUTH WARD	162
STREATHAM WELLS WARD	550
THORNTON WARD	308
THURLOW PARK WARD	301
TULSE HILL WARD	854

VASSALL WARD	1432
(blank)	
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>15229</b>

**Table 3 – Age Groups**

Under 25	230
25 to 45	6050
46 to 64	7338
65+	2649
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>16267</b>

**Table 4 – Vulnerable / Disability**

Blind	6
Blind / Disability	8
Blind / Disability / Over 60	1
Blind / Over 60	5
Deaf	10
Deaf / Disability	1
Deaf / Disability / Over 60	1
Deaf / Over 60	4
Disability	448
Disability / Over 60	134
Over 60	1491
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>2109</b>

### **Future updates and improvements**

- 2.6 There are several other key improvements being developed, which will further enhance the offer to our residents:
- a. Request copy of tenancy agreement or lease;
  - b. Remove a household member;
  - c. Give notice to end the tenancy;
  - d. Update contact address details;
  - e. Change name and address;
  - f. Artificial intelligent Chatbot;
  - g. Fully integrated communication suite;
  - h. My documents to view communications;
  - i. Raise & Track Communal Repairs;
  - j. Right to Buy Online; and,
  - k. Northgate Outlook integration.

### **Feedback to date from Homeowner & Tenants**

- 2.7 The MyHousingonline website page is one of the most visited, second only to the Lambeth homepage (over the past 10-12 months).
- 2.8 Resident feedback, as can be seen below, is strong and constructive, however, the signup journey includes some additional steps, where some homeowners struggle at the initial registration stage. Overall, the feedback officers are getting via other channels remains very positive.

-  “**Very easy to understand**, very straight forward procedure”
-  “**Very Quick**”
-  “I find it **very easy** to understand, thanks for your service”
-  “In Theory it was **easy to understand**, However practical, I am still unable to access my account..”
-  “The portal **is easy to understand** as it’s laid out by different topics”
-  “**Simple and easy to use**”
-  “It looks **helpful and practical** which is a big help.”
-  “Relatively **straightforward** design and naming of sections”
-  “It will be helpful if we had a Lambeth app which is all inclusive of council and housing and tenant repairs”

### **How do people communicate with the Council with regard to repairs and bills for homeowners and tenants?**

2.9 Lambeth homeowners & tenants can communicate via several channels:

- a. Phone (Direct dial & Contact centre);
- b. Email;
- c. Letter; and,
- d. Face to face (AHO & Civic Centre – subject to organisational restrictions relating to Covid).

The channels are still available for residents to choose the appropriate medium which suits their circumstances. However, delivering the housing online account provides an additional option for residents to engage and self-serve. Historically residents were limited to engaging with the Council between 9-5 (Mon-Fri) or email out of hours. As the above data shows (para 1.6), there is a solid demand for digital engagement and the ability to self-serve when made available. As residents get more comfortable self-serving, it will have the added benefit of creating capacity for the existing resource to focus on the more complex cases.

2.10 Homeowner invoices get sent out in accordance with the respective lease or transfer. In Lambeth’s case, we operate variable service charges, which mean issuing an estimate before the start of the financial year and issuing an actual charge 6 months after the close of the financial year. Tenant rent notifications get sent out in the February of each year.

- 2.11 Most existing resident communication comes into the business via email and direct dial calls. As customers continue to channel shift over the coming months, and the online offer is enriched with additional options such as single sign-on, we expect that the housing online will become the channel of choice for most residents.
- 2.12 The soft launch for property repairs for tenants went live in mid-December 21. Since then, we have continuously gathered feedback from our tenants and tweaked the end-to-end online journey while expanding the rollout across more wards. The rollout was deliberately phased, which enabled us to enhance the repairs journey as we progressed. All tenants in the north & south of the borough, who have signed up to the housing account online, can now raise repairs online.
- 2.13 The tenant feedback to date around the online repair's functionality is also very positive. Please see some examples of the feedback below:

-  "I just click on the line and it ask me for my email and password, **went straight to the web page very simple.** I like it **and I will use it to book in a repair instead of using the phone** and I can chase and see what repairs I have had done."
-  "Very straightforward and the **Repair Videos also are a useful** tool for the basic internal problems that can occur and do not need reporting to the council and can be fixed by yourself."
-  "The website is **easy to navigate** and all my repairs are listed clearly."
-  "**Extremely useful, super helpful**"
-  "On the whole I found the **descriptive photos very helpful** in identifying and requesting the correct repairs needed, very very useful and **easy to navigate**"
-  "Just to try it out, well done **easy to use**"
-  "I choose this because the **main information about the repair, ie report date, description of repair was there to be seen.** I was able to see the status of an repair that I have reported, however, it **doesn't give information on what the step will be if the repair wasn't completed**"
-  "I went around the info several time before actually getting to the page I need to get to start a repair. **Recommend to have two links: a direct link and an information link**"

- 2.14 Further to the above, it's worth noting that tenants can only raise property repairs online at this stage. We are currently building the communal repairs area on the portal. Once this is completed, it will provide a more rounded experience for the homeowners and tenants from end to end.

### **Customer call centre**

- 2.15 The current call centre contract with Capita commenced in 2011 and was extended to incorporate Housing - 2018. The contract in its entirety expires - 2026. The proposed contract award for specialist housing services is expected to be achieved in early September 2022 with a three-month transition/mobilisation around the new service running September 2022 – November 2022, at which point the new service will be fully operational.
- 2.16 The council published its customer experience strategy in June 2021 with the vision: *“We make access to all council services simple for all, ensure that we offer a quality customer-focused service end-to-end, and enable maximum self-serve for those that can”*

In order to support this vision, the council has reviewed its approach to providing call centre facilities to its residents and customers and now intends to terminate (in part) the contract with Capita, that provides the current 'housing call centre service' (including emergency and out of hours calls) and in its place, procure a strategic partner to deliver a 'specialist repairs call centre service'. This new service will align with the objectives and vision of the Customer Experience Strategy (2021), ensuring the best customer experience possible.

Capita agree with the proposed (in part) termination of the contract, recognising that the provision of housing call centre services, is not part of their usual portfolio.

Additionally, the Council have procured short term additional repairs call centre capacity to ensure resilience during the winter months and across the period of transition. This provision commenced in December 2021.

The council are also scoping for a different and new insourced model for non-repairs calls, including a telephony and AI platform to support in-house operations and developing skills and internal capacity.

- 2.17 The procurement of a new strategic partner for a 'specialist repairs call centre service' will be based around a new specification that has been designed to facilitate a modern customer call service that is:
- a. efficient and flexible;
  - b. built around maximising the use of technology;
  - c. encourages and rewards continuous innovation; and,
  - d. provides a great customer experience.

### **Expected Outcomes & Critical Success Factors**

- 2.18 The overarching expected outcome of the new housing contact centre delivery model is that it will provide an improved customer experience and performance against KPIs. This can be further understood by the following project objectives:
- a. To cease the contractual agreement with Capita for the provision of the housing contact centre.
  - b. To transition identified non-technical services in house.
  - c. To procure a specialist provider to deliver the contact centre for the emergency out of hours & repairs services.

- d. To procure a specialist provider that can support wider Lambeth ambitions for innovation in both technology and customer experience.
- e. To develop a hybrid delivery approach that connects all elements of the Lambeth Contact Centre service from first line response to back office. This is also to include the repairs contract.
- f. To undertake service design for in-house services to identify opportunities to improve the customer experience journey and enable effective & efficient delivery of the hybrid model.
- g. To ensure measurements and KPI's are in place to monitor effective service provision and identify continuous areas for improvement. These will be included in the invitation to tender for consideration of the service providers.

### **3. FINANCE**

- 3.1 There are no direct financial impacts arising as a consequence of this report.

### **4. LEGAL AND DEMOCRACY**

- 4.1 Section 21 of the Housing Act 1985 gives the council the power for the general management, regulation and control of its housing stock.
- 4.2 Section 111 of the Local Government Act 1972 gives the council the power to do anything (whether or not involving the expenditure, borrowing or lending of money or the acquisition or disposal of any property or rights) which is calculated to facilitate, or is conducive or incidental to, the discharge of any of its functions.
- 4.3 Section 149 of the Equality Act 2010 sets out the public sector equality duty. The public sector equality duty requires public authorities to have due regard to the need to:
  - a. Eliminate discrimination, harassment, victimisation and any other conduct that is prohibited by or under the 2010 Act;
  - b. Advance equality of opportunity between those who share a protected characteristic and persons who do not share it; and
  - c. Foster good relations between those who share a protected characteristic and those who do not.
- 4.4 Having due regard to the need to advance equality of opportunity between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic (age, disability, gender reassignment; pregnancy and maternity, race, religion and belief, sex and sexual orientation) and persons who do not share it involves having due regard, in particular, to the need to:
  - a. remove or minimise disadvantages suffered by persons who share a relevant protected characteristic that are connected to that characteristic;
  - b. take steps to meet the needs of persons who share a relevant protected characteristic that are different from the needs of persons who do not share it; and,
  - c. encourage persons who share a relevant protected characteristic to participate in public life or in any other activity in which participation by such persons is disproportionately low.
- 4.5 The public sector equality duty must be discharged at the time that a particular policy is under consideration or decision is taken – that is, in the development of policy options, and in making a final decision. A public body should not seek to discharge the public sector equality duty after a decision has been taken
- 4.6 There were no further comments from Democratic Services.

## **5. CONSULTATION AND CO-PRODUCTION**

5.1 Not applicable.

## **6. RISK MANAGEMENT**

6.1 There are no direct risks arising from this report.

## **7. EQUALITIES IMPACT ASSESSMENT**

7.1 Not applicable. This report details multiple activities which have all been through the EQIA process either when changes occur (CTS scheme changes) or as a part of the procurement process.

## **8. COMMUNITY SAFETY**

8.1 Not applicable

## **9. ORGANISATIONAL IMPLICATIONS**

### **Environmental**

9.1 Not applicable.

### **Health**

9.2 Not applicable.

### **Corporate Parenting**

9.3 Not applicable.

### **Staffing and accommodation**

9.4 Not applicable.

### **Responsible Procurement**

9.5 Not applicable.

## **10. TIMETABLE FOR IMPLEMENTATION**

10.1 Not applicable.

## AUDIT TRAIL

<b>Name and Position/Title</b>	<b>Lambeth Directorate</b>	<b>Date Sent</b>	<b>Date Received</b>	<b>Comments in paragraph:</b>
Councillor Maria Kay	Cabinet Member for Housing and Homelessness	08.02.22		
Bayo Dosunmu, Strategic Director	Resident Services	08.02.22	11.02.22	
Neil Euesden, Director of Housing	Resident Services	08.02.22	11.02.22	
Andrew Ramsden, Finance	Finance and Property	08.02.22	08.02.22	
Greg Carson, Legal Services	Legal and Governance	08.02.22	08.02.22	4.1 - 4.5
Maria Burton, Democratic Services	Legal and Governance	08.02.22	09.22.22	

## REPORT HISTORY

<b>Original discussion with Cabinet Member</b>	N/A
<b>Report deadline</b>	01.03.22
<b>Date final report sent</b>	21.02.22
<b>Part II Exempt from Disclosure/confidential accompanying report?</b>	No
<b>Key decision report</b>	No
<b>Date first appeared on forward plan</b>	Not applicable
<b>Key decision reasons</b>	Not applicable.
<b>Background information</b>	Not applicable.
<b>Appendices</b>	None