

CITY OF PLYMOUTH

Report: Overview and Scrutiny Panel -
Transport, Housing and Related Regeneration

Subject: Housing Repairs and Maintenance Service

Committee: Overview and Scrutiny Commission

Date: 6th February, 2003

Ref: 5/THRR/SP/CH

Part: I

Executive Summary:

The purpose of this report is to submit findings and recommendations to the Overview and Scrutiny Commission following meetings of the Scrutiny Panel responsible for reviewing the Housing Repairs and Maintenance Service.

Corporate Strategy:

The establishment of Overview and Scrutiny Panels forms part of the corporate strategy for implementation of that part of the modernisation agenda relative to new democratic arrangements.

Financial Implications:

It is anticipated that improvements to the telephone system relating to dealing with tenant requested repairs will have financial implications, as yet unquantified.

Recommendations:

- (1) To continue to progress proposals for the full integration of the service by filling the vacant Manager post as a matter of urgency.
- (2) That Officers -
 - (i) continue investigations into the most efficient method of dealing with telephone enquiries;
 - (ii) clarify the legal position regarding obtaining entry by force for gas servicing;
 - (iii) undertake a review of Council garage rentals.

- (3) In the interests of maintaining tighter control on expenditure, and for the sake of uniformity, the decision to terminate the use of trading accounts be reconsidered.
- (4) The Consultant's Action Plan be revised to more accurately reflect the City Council's needs and priorities.
- (5) The Panel's concern at the impact on the maintenance programme resulting from the pressure on repairs budgets be noted.
- (6) To submit the findings and recommendations of the Transport, Housing and Related Regeneration Overview and Scrutiny Panel to the Overview and Scrutiny Commission on 6th February, 2003.
- (7) Following ratification of this interim report, progress against recommendations 1-4 above be reported back to a future meeting of the Health and Social Well-being Scrutiny Committee, pending submission of a final report to the Scrutiny Commission.

Background Papers:

- (1) The Audit Commission's Inspection Report into the City Council's Housing Repairs and Maintenance Service dated August 2002.
 - (2) Minutes of Transport, Housing and Related Regeneration Overview and Scrutiny Panel Task and Finish Group held on 5th December, 2002.
 - (3) Consultant's Action Plan.
 - (4) Gas Servicing Action Plan and Procedures.
-

DECISION	RECORD OF DECLARATION OF INTEREST
REASONS FOR DECISION	
ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS CONSIDERED	RECORD OF ANY DISPENSATIONS
REASONS FOR REJECTION OF ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS	RECORD OF PAPERS CONSIDERED



REPORT OF THE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL – TRANSPORT, HOUSING AND RELATED REGENERATION

HOUSING REPAIRS AND MAINTENANCE SERVICE

1.0 Background

- 1.1 At its meeting on 31st October, 2002, the Overview and Scrutiny Commission gave approval to the inclusion of the Housing Repairs and Maintenance Service in the work programme of the Overview and Scrutiny Panel for Transport, Housing and Related Regeneration.
- 1.2 The Transport, Housing and Related Regeneration Scrutiny Panel subsequently agreed that a special Task and Finish Group be set up to look at both this issue and that of Council garage rentals, and the Group met on 5th December, 2002 and 3rd January, 2003 to consider the information available, as well as talk to Officers.

2.0 Panel Structure

Councillors

Councillor Mrs. Ford, in the Chair.
Councillors Brookshaw and Wheeler.

Also in Attendance

Belinda Pascoe	Housing Operations Manager
Martin Snell	Manufacturing/Acting Building Operations Manager
Len White	Operations Manager
Carole Hoyle	Democratic Support Officer

For one meeting:

Terry Deer	Team Leader (Heating) – Contracts
Chris Byers	Housing Strategy & Development

N.B. Councillor Brookshaw attended for the first meeting only.



3.0 Objectives

- 3.1 The special Task and Finish Group set up by the Transport, Housing and Related Regeneration Overview and Scrutiny Panel consider the City Council's Housing Repairs and Maintenance Service and submit its findings and recommendations to the Overview and Scrutiny Commission on 6th February, 2003.

4.0 The Detail

- 4.1 The Head of Housing and Residential Services presented the following documentation for the Panel's deliberation -

- (a) the Audit Commission's Inspection Report on the Housing Repairs and Maintenance Service;
- (b) the Action Plan developed by the Council's Consultants;
- (c) the Gas Servicing Action Plan and Procedures.

- 4.2 The Panel was also advised that, insofar as the Audit Commission Inspection was concerned, the findings were that the Housing Repairs and Maintenance Service provided by Plymouth City Council was "Fair", although the prospects for improvement were considered uncertain, mainly due to uncertainty about the future and management of the housing stock and the perceived need for better planning.

5.0 Comments

- 5.1 Following consideration of the documentation, and arising from questions by the Panel, Members heard -

- (i) that, with regard to Members' concern regarding the difficulties being experienced in contacting the repairs service via the telephone, investigations were continuing to determine the most appropriate method of dealing with this problem;
- (ii) of the progress being made on proposals designed to assist in gaining entry to those properties where access for gas servicing had been persistently refused, as follows:-
 - (a) that the cost of fitting a capping device on gas meters was in the region of £500-£1,000 per property and this was not therefore considered a viable option;



- (b) on the implementation of a Gas Servicing Action Plan and Procedures to -
- address the immediate issues regarding access;
 - tighten up and improve the monitoring activity;
 - ensure that the community generally was aware of issues regarding gas servicing, focussing extra effort on groups that may be unaware due to specific difficulties regarding access and communication;
- (c) that, pending clarification on the legality of obtaining entry by force, Officers were proceeding with proposals to take legal action against a number of “high resistance” cases, backed-up by publicity through the local media and P.E.T.R.A. (Plymouth Federation Tenants’ & Residents’ Association);
- (iii) that improvements to the quality of the service had, in part, been addressed through the integration of the service with the Direct Services Department and the introduction of new working practices. This should also assist in a reduction in the number of emergency/urgent repair orders and the level of variations. However, Officers accepted that this was an ongoing process and it was hoped that the imminent appointment of a Manager, albeit on a temporary basis pending a permanent appointment in March 2003, would greatly assist in moving the process forward;
- (iv) that the reinstatement of tenant consultative and decision-making structures was being progressed by -
- the introduction of Service Review Groups, which would be looking at the issues regarding the implementation of the planned programme of repairs and improvement works;
 - bi-monthly meetings of H.A.R.P. (Housing and Residents in Partnership);
 - the proposed introduction of a newsletter to tenants, in association with P.E.T.R.A.;
- (v) that, with regard to the issue of Council garages, these were self-financing with the income received from rental amounting to over £1 million. However, it was accepted that there was scope for a review of garage rentals, particularly in respect of those located in the Inner City area and the cages at Devonport, which were extremely popular;



- (vi) of the Officers' concern regarding the decision to terminate the use of trading accounts;
- (vii) that, although the Consultant's Action Plan contained some excellent proposals, it was a generic document and Officers considered that it should be revised to more accurately reflect the City Council's needs and priorities;
- (viii) that, although the efficiency savings from the Consultant's report would help to make the service more cost-effective, there remained considerable pressure on repairs budgets which would impact on the maintenance programme.

6.0 Recommendations

6.1 The recommendations of the Panel are as follows:-

- (1) To continue to progress proposals for the full integration of the service by filling the vacant Manager post as a matter of urgency.
- (2) That Officers -
 - (i) continue investigations into the most efficient method of dealing with telephone enquiries;
 - (ii) clarify the legal position regarding obtaining entry by force for gas servicing;
 - (iii) undertake a review of Council garage rentals.
- (3) In the interests of maintaining tighter control on expenditure, and for the sake of uniformity, the decision to terminate the use of trading accounts be reconsidered.
- (4) The Consultant's Action Plan be revised to more accurately reflect the City Council's needs and priorities.
- (5) The Panel's concern at the impact on the maintenance programme resulting from the pressure on repairs budgets be noted.
- (6) To submit the findings and recommendations of the Transport, Housing and Related Regeneration Overview and Scrutiny Panel to the Overview and Scrutiny Commission on 6th February, 2003.
- (7) Following ratification of this interim report, progress against recommendations 1-4 above be reported back to a future meeting of the Health and Social Well-being Scrutiny Committee, pending submission of a final report to the Scrutiny Commission.