

**REPORT TO:** SHAREHOLDER SUB COMMITTEE

**DATE:** 18 NOVEMBER 2021

**TITLE:** RESPONSIVE REPAIRS AND CUSTOMER ACCESS UPDATE

**LEAD OFFICER:** ANDREW MURRAY, DIRECTOR OF HOUSING (01279) 446676

**CONTRIBUTING OFFICER:** DARYL CLUCAS, ASSISTANT OPERATIONS MANAGER – BUSINESS SUPPORT (01279) 446316

**RECOMMENDED that:**

**A** The Sub Committee notes the progress in the report.

**BACKGROUND**

1. This report sets out the progress with the above, as well as other changes that are proposed for enhancing customer access to the Council's responsive repairs service. This includes, enhanced repair tracking processes, appointments/treatment of planned repairs priorities, provision of a SMS text message appointment reminder service, and tenant profiling.

**REPAIRS ONLINE PORTAL**

2. Housing Services Landlord survey identified the need to further enhance the way it interacts with its customers. Almost 70 per cent of respondents stated that their last contact with the Council was regarding a repair, with 30 per cent of the respondents stating that they would prefer to interact with the Housing Service through an electronic method of communication such as the internet.
3. The new Online Customer Repairs Portal went live on 30 August 2020. This will provide access, including repairs, to a range of housing services regarding their access to the Council,
4. Online requests to the portal also allows access to tenant and leaseholder charge accounts. The portal provides enhanced visibility of information, easier access to council services that will generat4ed ongoing efficiencies.
5. The Customer Portal will reduce the number of manual transactions being processed, speeding up responses to enquiries. Associated business processes created to deal with the contact from customers are allowing more effective responses to customer enquiries as part of the Council's wider Customer Access Strategy.
6. Customers will have the ability to request repair time slots on line which best meet their needs for their own personal circumstances, as well allow HTS

(Property and Environment) Ltd (HTS) to better plan around the demands of the customer communication and notifications. It is expected for HTS efficiencies to be realized both in repairs communications and contact with the customer with the repair centre having information available on line when required. In addition, the Council continue to evaluate the options for implementing additional functions into the portal, including online housing and garage applications, Choice Based Lettings, reporting anti-social behaviour and other estate management functions.

7. The Council has been capturing advertisement of the customer portal to all tenants and leaseholders through the quarterly statements and Harlow Times. At present there are 2,647 registrations to the portal and the current breakdown of registrations is as follows:-

Application Status	Total	Comment
Verified	1,396	Registration complete
Person Matched	406	Waiting on applicant to apply code
New Registrations	76	Awaiting internal validations
Declined	769	Applicant advised to make contact

- Of the 1,396 complete registrations there have been 525 repair requests that have been completed via the portal.

### **Appointments/Planned Repairs**

8. HTS currently reports the number of appointments made and kept within their monthly performance reports. Performance reports for September 2021 indicate 98.25% below the target set. Trend analysis also indicates there are increasing enquiries and complaints during 2021. Emerging from lockdown indicates challenges for HTS with inconsistent levels of communications between HTS and customers.
9. The landlord survey highlights the biggest source of dissatisfaction with the Council is related to the repairs service and its communications. The Council has reaffirmed the requirement for the long term replacement of the “Planned Works” priority in its current form.
10. In 2019/20, HTS have reduced the repairs timescale for planned words from 12 months to nine months, with an aspiration to reduce this timescale further where achievable. In addition, day to day repair appointment slots have been changed from two hour slots to four hour slots in order to improve productivity. The Covid-19 pandemic has stalled progress, and HTS are establishing a “Recovery Plan” for all its activities, which primary focus is on reducing backlogs, and establishing new working arrangements. As part of these changes, HTS is now in advanced communications with unions leaders to provide further enhancements to improve their productivity and deliver better customer outcomes by extending their working hours for urgent/standard repairs, as well as offering weekend working for certain trades.
11. Initially, this will trialed by the plumbing operatives to gauge the level of uptake

and to overcome any implementation issues, commencing early 2022 subject to agreement. In addition, HTS are developing a feasibility study for providing more flexibility when offering an appointment slot for planned works at the point where the is first reported, with the ambition to provide an appointment date/time when a repair categorized as needing to be planned is first reported, keeping the customer informed. Progress will be kept under review and aligned to priorities from the Best Value review, reporting progress back to the Sub Committee meeting.

### **SMS text messaging**

12. HTS introduced the ability to send an SMS (text message) reminder of an upcoming repairs appointment. This allows for enhanced customer information to be provided, with the aim being to reduce the number of failed appointments due to “no access”. The introduction of SMS reminders also has the potential to reduce the number of paper letters being sent to customers to confirm repairs appointments when repairs are raised.
13. The system is currently working well and HTS is looking at ways to increase Communications in this manner to maximise the chance of making sure that appointments are kept. It is recognised however there is a need for associated processes to be reviewed for consistency so that the customer experience can be more positive as this is one of the key areas for improvement from complaints and enquiries.

### **NEXT STEPS**

- 14 There are a number of areas where improvements can be made to the information available to the Council about the status of a repair and specific work carried out to the property. There are IT system interfaces available that share this information automatically between the IT systems in use at both the Council and HTS. These interfaces will continue to be enhanced to provide further transparency about the type/cost of repair undertaken. The ambition is to increase the number of events being passed between IT systems which will enable the Council to provide customers with much more information about repairs they have reported to HTS, rather than re-directing the customer to the repairs contact center.
- 15 Housing services are in the process of updating and realigning its customer service access plans to align to the new Corporate Strategy priorities. These include HTS plans, tenant profiling, and reinvigorating the Corporate Customer Service Access Strategy. A scoping report is being produced in November 2021 with progress reported to the Shareholder Sub Committee later in the year.

### **IMPLICATIONS**

#### **Environment and Planning (Includes Sustainability)**

As contained in the report.

**Author: Andrew Bramidge, Director of Strategic Growth and Regeneration**

**Finance (Includes ICT, and Property and Facilities)**

None Specific – achievements set out within the report have been delivered within existing revenue and capital budgets.

**Author: Simon Freeman, Deputy to the Chief Executive and Director of Finance**

**Housing**

As outlined in the report.

**Author: Andrew Murray, Director of Housing**

**Community Wellbeing**

None specific.

**Author: Jane Greer, Director of Communities and Environment**

**Governance (Includes HR)**

Continuous improvement on customer communications is important to the achievement of reduced complaints which has been trend in recent performance reporting to members.

**Author: Simon Hill, Director of Governance and Corporate Support**

**Appendices**

None.

**Background Papers**

None.

**Glossary of terms/abbreviations used**

HTS – HTS (Property and Environment) Ltd