

**Customer and Community Scrutiny Panel – Meeting held on Wednesday, 6th April, 2022.**

**Present:-** Councillors Begum (Chair), Muvvala (Vice-Chair), Ajaib, Ali, Kaur, Mohammad and Sandhu

**Also present under Rule 30:-** Councillor Gahir

**Apologies for Absence:-** Councillor Hussain and Minhas

**PART 1**

**31. Declarations of Interest**

Councillor K Kaur declared that she lived in a housing association property. Councillor Kaur remained and participated in the meeting.

**32. Minutes of the Meeting held on 2nd March, 2022**

**Resolved:** That the minutes of the meeting held on 2 March 2022 be agreed as a correct record, subject to the following being noted:

That Members had requested a report setting out statistics relating to the call centre be submitted at the April meeting of the Panel. This report had not been submitted and the Chair undertook to follow this up with officers.

**33. Member Questions**

None received

**34. RMI Contract Update**

The SBC RMI Contract Manager presented an update report which set out the performance of Osborne's delivery of the RMI contract, focusing on the following areas:

- Overall performance of the Osborne Contract.
- Overview of complaints against service.
- New performance measures.
- Planned works 2021/22.

Members asked the following questions, made the following comments, which were responded to as follows:

- Had the staff vacancies detailed in the report been filled?

The SBC RMI Contract Manager advised that the vacancies had arisen due to a shortage of skilled tradespeople as a result of the effects of the pandemic,

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Brexit and many early retirements. Some vacancies had been filled, for example, during the last six months thirty new staff had been recruited across all service areas, with the majority on the responsive repairs side. Osborne had implemented a workforce strategy which included upskilling office and site based staff and rewarding them financially.

- The report set out four actions around staff recruitment. Were there any timescales for the recruitment drive or for identifying and engaging new supply chain partners? Had outstanding works and re-opened responsive repair cases been given higher priority?

The Manager from Osborne advised that the responsive repairs team would be fully staffed by the following week and he expected to see gradual inroads into the backlog of works over coming months. Staff recruitment and retention was also an issue as the market for these skilled tradespeople was extremely competitive. Osborne had recruited additional supply chain partners to deal with voids and expanded its portfolio in other areas, for example, plastering and drainage. He expected these contractors to be on site within next four weeks.

He added that some works, which had been closed down by the previous management team during the early pandemic had now been prioritised. Any serious long standing repairs issues had been transferred over to the planned works team to prioritise them.

- The report stated that the Council checked only 10% of the nineteen thousand responsive repairs carried out annually and that despite some initial improvements there were no indications of concrete improvements.
- What were the reasons for the high number of complaints outlined in the report?
- How long had this contract been in place and how many KPI's been met? All the issues under discussion should have been tackled and resolved sooner.
- At what stage did the Council realise that this contract was not fulfilling the needs of tenants and what steps had been taken to resolve this?

The Account Manager from Osborne stated that checks were not done on a random basis and that the Council carried out physical checks of 10% of repairs on the basis of different payment codes, taking out high value repairs, large works, and those that were measurable, e.g long runs of fencing or large areas of plastering. The checks would verify that repairs were done correctly while taking into account customer satisfaction feedback and any complaints. He added that physical post inspections were targeted at areas where the Council checked the value of the works were invoiced correctly.

The Account Manager from Osborne added that the company had its own regime of post inspections, which included desktop inspections of repairs of

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things such as leaky taps, which were verified through customer contact and photo evidence to ensure that the works had been satisfactorily completed.

The SBC RMI Contract Manager advised that there had been some early signs of improvement in recent months, however, this data and trends would need to be monitored over coming months. Customer satisfaction logs indicated improvement and a downward trend in the number of complaints received. It was too early to draw definite conclusions from this, however, he expected to see a clearer picture following completion of the recruitment and training drive and embedding of the new supply chain.

He added that the contract, which had been in place for just over four years, had initially been managed by Interserve on a different basis and had not performed well. Osborne had taken on existing staff from Interserve and had faced the added challenge of training the staff to new ways of operating. Osborne had therefore experienced teething problems with the contract which had been compounded by the effects of the pandemic, Brexit and supply chain challenges.

The Account Manager from Osborne responded that the contract as a whole had been working well in many areas, for example, gas repairs and servicing, compliance and planned works, about which very few complaints were received. The area of responsive repairs had been identified as not working well and the Council had committed to work in close cooperation with Osborne to resolve this.

- Was there an inspections regime of street lamps by Osborne or did they wait for residents to report faulty lighting?

The Manager from Osborne responded that there was no regime in place to inspect lamps. SBC used a system to identify failed lamps which would require someone to report an outage. Osborne did not have access to the Council's system of reporting outages.

The Assistant Director Place Operations explained that the Council had received Department for Transport grant funding to upgrade street lights to LED. Under this scheme, some, though not all housing stock lighting had also been converted to LED. This meant LED outages could be identified remotely. There was potential to upgrade the rest of the housing stock lighting as part of the thirty year plan, which was reviewed annually. As the lighting was funded through the HRA (Housing Revenue Account) it was remotely connected to the highways system and the Council could pick up outages but would not report these to Osborne. If the outage related to a standard sodium light then this would not be picked up by highways team as it was not part of highways system.

- A Member speaking under rule 30 asked what kind of negative feedback had been received via the customer satisfaction surveys. Had any positive feedback been received?

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- What types of questions were asked in the customer satisfaction surveys?
- How were comments from tenants detailed in the report conveyed to Osborne?
- How was feedback gathered from tenants? Satisfaction cards should be left with customers upon completion of repairs. Was there any feedback from SBC officers regarding this? Could a report regarding the pros and cons of different feedback methods and costings be submitted at a future meeting for Members to comment on?

The Account Manager from Osborne advised that negative feedback on repairs related mainly to issues such as leaks, mould and damp and poor communication with Osborne's office staff – all of which had all been identified as areas for improvement. The use of PDA devices to carry out customer surveys had been discussed at a previous Panel meeting. Both Osborne and the Council carried out telephone surveys on completed recent repairs. Osborne would be informed of complaints through the RMI complaints process and through Councillor feedback.

A Member suggested issuing satisfaction cards to tenants after completion of repairs. She asked if SBC officers had provided any feedback regarding this. The Chair advised that she had not received any feedback from officers regarding the matter and undertook to look into this after the meeting.

The SBC RMI Contract Manager advised that there would be a cost element to issuing satisfaction cards. He undertook to look into the matter and report back. The feedback detailed in the report related to planned works where residents were given a survey following completion of these works.

Another Member agreed that in the interests of ensuring candid feedback from tenants, a survey should be left with them after works had been completed, (rather than use the PDAs on site to record their comments).

The SBC RMI Contract Manager stated that his preference would be for a follow up phone call shortly after completion of repairs. Leaving satisfaction cards had value, however, in his view, recording comments on a tablet immediately after completion of repairs was not the best option as tenants needed to be given a few days to be sure that the repairs were satisfactory.

The Chair asked how tenants whose first language was not English could provide feedback.

The SBC RMI Contract Manager explained that members of his team spoke a number of other languages and could be deployed to carry out surveys in other languages.

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The Chair proposed that a report setting out the costs and benefits of different methods for gathering customer satisfaction feedback be provided at a future Panel meeting.

The Manager from Osborne stated that sending out surveys by text message a few days after the repair would have a better strike rate than leaving customer satisfaction cards.

The SBC RMI Contract Manager stated that it was important to capture as much feedback as possible and he would explore a range of possible feedback options and report back to the Panel.

- Why were voids were still rated amber?

The SBC RMI Contract Manager advised that this was because the void results fell slightly short of the target set. The quality of void refurbishment had always been to a high standard and the turnaround time had improved. Voids would be completed in an average of 18 days. There were 240 void properties per year, currently there were 32 empty properties, which would be ready in an average of 18 days.

- In relation to KDI performance measure 8, the report advised that the target for a first appointment for urgent and routine repairs was 10 days but the performance was 21 days. Did this mean that tenants had to wait 10 days for urgent repairs to be carried out?

The SBC RMI Contract Manager stated that there were three elements to repairs - emergency repairs would be undertaken within 24 hours and were not included in this measure. This measure related to urgent works (those which needed to be completed within 7 days) and routine works (those which needed to be completed within 20 days). He was looking into potentially separating out the timescales for urgent and routine works and providing two separate targets in the future.

- The report stated that Osborne had repaid the Council £13.5k for failing to meet performance measures – what period did this relate to?

The SBC RMI Contract Manager advised that the penalties, which were part of the new measures, related to the period October 2021 to February 2022. Prior to that period penalties had not been invoked due to the pandemic.

- The report stated that Osborne had repeatedly failed on KDI 2 – ‘The percentage of repairs due in the month which were completed within the prescribed timescale.’ How likely was it that Osborne would catch up on this backlog of 600-800 repairs.

The Account Manager from Osborne stated that it would be difficult to catch up on these due to the problematic nature of the repairs which included things such as fencing works, roofing works and repairing storm damage. Challenges faced included the fact that fencing was currently difficult to

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resource and buy since costs had increased by 40% recently. The cost of labour was equally high due to huge demands on this service area. Osborne were tackling this by seeking alternative supply chains and additional recruitment. He expected this situation to improve over the summer months.

- What action could the Council take if Osborne continued to fail on this KDI?

The SBC RMI Contract Manager explained that Osborne had been acting responsibly by prioritising the existing backlog of repairs, which meant that newer more recent repairs were being pushed to the back of the queue, which is why the newer repairs were failing the target set and giving rise to complaints. He added that he expected to see a significant reduction in the backlog of works once all the additional resources and mitigating measures were in place.

- Did Osborne use local contractors?

The Account Manager from Osborne stated that some local supply chain contractors were used, though this would depend on the trade or specialism being recruited to.

- The report identified two issues in relation to complaints regarding long standing repair issues – ‘the attitude and actions of supervisors’ and the ‘owning and closing problems’ and that supervisors were now being supervised and mentored. Was this enough to satisfy residents or should apologies should be issued? How were apologies conveyed to customers?

The Account Manager from Osborne explained that in such instances the company would follow the joint complaints process and would issue an apology. Depending on the nature and level of the complaint, the company would apologise either in writing or by telephone and inform the customer of any outcomes. If the complaint had been escalated, then the customer would be informed of any investigation results, site visits and face to face visits may also take place. With regard to the second KDI, it should be noted that the company were taking responsible and transparent action. The staff who had transferred to Osborne from Interserve had been used to different working practices and these issues were being addressed through additional staff training, mentoring and supervision.

- Had Osborne had lost the services of its cleaning and caretaking partner with no notice period?

The Account Manager from Osborne stated that the company had met with the existing contractor to finalise the schedule of cleaning and caretaking on site and had experienced resourcing challenges due to the volume of works. It was in the process of recruiting for these positions. It had focussed on issues which significantly impacted residents’ quality of life, such as commode clearances, and targeting blocks of flats and areas which gave rise to most of

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the negative feedback. Osborne had its own directly employed cleaners and caretakers. Fifty percent of services were delivered by direct labour. The other fifty percent, which was delivered by contractors, was at issue.

- How many local contractors did the company use and in which trades?
- Which skillset or trades were causing the most delays with appointments?

The Account Manager from Osborne stated that he did not have exact figures to hand, however, the company used a local clearance company, a local void company and a local electrical firm. He added that 90% of those directly employed on the contractor side were from local area.

The Account Manager from Osborne added that plumbing leaks were not simply a seasonal problem. The company had experienced difficulties in recruiting plumbers directly. This shortage had taken several months to resolve and had further exacerbated the repairs backlogs.

A Member speaking under Rule 30 proposed the following motions be forwarded to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee and then to Cabinet:

1. That customer satisfaction feedback following responsive repairs should not be undertaken by the engineer on site and that other cost effective measures for gathering customer satisfaction should be explored;
2. That any company awarded a Slough Borough Council contract should ensure that they use local employees.

The SBC RMI Contract Manager advised that local labour and firms would be used where possible. However, the contract operated within a cost framework and would have to adhere to the principles of 'best value'. Therefore, Osborne were obliged to balance the ambition to use local sub-contractors and tradespeople against any cost implications.

The Account Manager from Osborne explained that the company faced recruiting challenges due to a nationwide shortage of skilled tradespeople, who were in high demand and were better remunerated in the private sector.

The Account Manager from Osborne added that current market conditions were challenging and the company was rolling out a new staff training and retention policy to mitigate against this.

- If the second motion (above) was implemented, would there be a degradation in service provision?

The Account Manager from Osborne stated that there would be no degradation in service provision.

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The SBC RMI Contract Manager added that some companies used by Osborne were not based in Slough though their employees and operatives were local. He undertook to provide a more detailed breakdown of local employees and firms employed by Osborne.

- What percent of the workforce were sub-contractors and what percent were full time employees?

The Account Manager from Osborne advised that there was a 60/40 split i.e 60% were directly employed and 40% were supply chain/sub-contracted workers. For example, planned works, due to their volume, frequency and commercial sensitivity were delivered by sub-contractors, whereas compliance works were predominantly supplied by direct local labour.

- The contract outlined training opportunities and developing apprenticeships.

The Account Manager from Osborne stated that the company had taken on four apprentices recently and were developing a matrix and a strategy for their induction, training, skills development, attendance at college and familiarisation with all aspects of the company's operations.

The Panel adjourned for 15 minutes to allow Members to break their fasts for Ramadan.

- Why was performance measure 2 below target – was this due to skills, materials or staffing shortages?

The SBC RMI Contract Manager explained that this was because the backlog of repairs was being prioritised ahead of newer, more recent requests for repairs. He undertook to provide a detailed breakdown of which areas were failing.

Following an additional question regarding the use of local contractors, the Account Manager from Osborne responded that it was the company's ambition to use as much local labour as possible. For example, one of their void contractors had recently upscaled and all its employees were from the local area. However, due to nature of some very specialist works it was not always possible to employ only local people.

- Were the four apprentices from the local area?

The Account Manager from Osborne confirmed that all four apprentices were local.

- Why was the target for KDI 2 not being met?

The SBC RMI Contract Manager and the Account Manager from Osborne responded that this had arisen due to an increase in demand during winter months compounded by the recent storms. Many fencing and roofing works

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were delayed and could not go ahead immediately due health safety concerns arising from poor weather conditions.

A Member requested that data regarding how many local residents were employed by Osborne be circulated to the Panel. The Account Manager from Osborne stated that this information could be collated by postcode and would be provided after the meeting.

The motions discussed above were seconded, and agreed unanimously by the Panel. They would be referred to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee and subsequently to Cabinet.

The Assistant Director Place Operations explained that officers could further explore the use of local labour with Osborne. All council tenders had to take into consideration quality, price and social return. In view of the Council's current financial situation and the spending protocols in place, both the Council and Commissioners would expect best value and quality to be prioritised. If the lowest prices were found to be outside Slough then local employees and companies may not be used.

The Chair concluded the meeting by thanking officers for the report. She stated that in view of the challenges faced by Osborne, the Panel did not expect to see immediate improvements in service delivery. Nevertheless, going forward, the Panel hoped to see significant positive changes and improvements in service delivery, evidenced by a reduction in the number of complaints and better and more efficient services for the residents of Slough. The Panel noted recent improvements in service delivery and anticipated further significant positive improvements in the future.

**Resolved:** that the report be noted.

**35. Houses of Multiple Occupation**

**Resolved:** That this item be deferred to the next meeting.

**36. Members' Attendance Record**

**Resolved:** That the Members' attendance record be noted.

**37. Date of Next Meeting - TBA**

To be announced.

Chair

(Note: The Meeting opened at 6.30 pm and closed at 8.18 pm)

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