

## **WATFORD COMMUNITY HOUSING TASK GROUP**

**17 October 2018**

Present: Councillor A Khan (Chair)

Councillors S Cavinder, A Grimston and K Hastrick

Also present: Tina Barnard, Watford Community Housing Chief Executive  
(minute numbers 7 to 10)

Ben Johnson, Watford Community Housing Group Director  
of Operations (minute numbers 7 to 10)

Officers: Committee and Scrutiny Support Officer (AG)

### **7 Apologies for absence**

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Dychton.

### **8 Disclosure of interests**

There were no disclosures of interest.

### **9 Actions from previous meeting**

The notes from the meeting held on 24 September 2018 were submitted and signed.

The Committee and Scrutiny Support Officer (AG) advised the task group that all of the actions from the meeting had been completed.

### **10 Report from Watford Community Housing**

The Chair introduced the report from Watford Community Housing (WCH) addressing the questions raised by the task group. Members noted the contents of the report.

The WCH Group Director of Operations gave a presentation to the task group on the operation of Watford Community Housing. This focused on service improvement, the customer experience and digitalisation, developing new homes, areas for improvement, what tenants thought of the services provided (including a range of survey and benchmarking data), information on service

charges and value for money drawing on sector comparisons. He concluded by explaining how staff wanted to deliver the 'Super Brand', how board and senior management were committed to delivering great service and growth - and how tenants were generally satisfied with services.

Members asked questions in four broad topic areas - the WCH Chief Executive and Group Director of Operations:

### **Service Charges**

- Clarified that service charges did not include personal charges tenants were responsible for - such as water and gas supply. Tenants were provided with a break-down of the charges.
- Explained that charges were rarely made for services that were not provided and with appropriate reimbursements being made where identified. The onus was on WCH not to charge where a service was not provided. Service charges were non-profit making and losses were sometimes made. For example, all of ground maintenance costs were not always recovered. If there was a service failure - a credit note was obtained from the contractor.
- Advised that checks were made on 10% of services to ensure they were properly provided. WCH held regular meetings with contractors to discuss issues. The organisation investigated complaints from tenants and received feedback on services from resident inspectors who were well placed to provide information. In addition, feedback was provided by estate officers.
- Explained the steps that could be taken when a contract's standards or performance indicators were not being met - these included improvement plans and with the potential for contracts being terminated. 60% of a contract related to qualitative issues and 40% to cost.
- Advised that there had been the lowest number of queries in relation to service charges for a number of years in 2018.

### **Maintenance**

- Clarified that there was a legal requirement for annual boiler checks - and WCH had a 100% success rate in September. A service of the boiler was included in this check.
- Explained that small third party maintenance contracts were granted to limited companies. Performance was monitored on the lines of the larger contracts with the 10% check on the services provided for example.
- Advised how non-European Union procurement rules allowed leaseholders to employ contractors – although this rarely happened. The

contractor would have to comply with health and safety requirements to be viable.

- Explained that the average time for letting a void property was 38 days. However, this was reduced to 10 to 12 days in respect of houses. Sometimes people requested further works that added to the time period. WCH had a proactive housing management approach to identifying void properties. The steps taken to make a property suitable for habitation included ensuring it met lettable standards, conducting necessary safety checks, carrying out specified works and a final sign off by a team leader.
- Agreed there was a need to examine when a property was placed on the choice based letting scheme to avoid delays in people taking up occupation.

## **Repairs**

- Explained how the performance of the WCH in-house repair team was monitored and developed. This included challenging poor work, introducing league tables to utilise peer pressure, conducting skills mapping to multi-skill operatives and the holding of six weekly team de-briefs and one to ones around customer satisfaction. Staff responded well to the one to one sessions and new starters were advised on the cultural monitoring procedures. The executive team met every six months to review performance and determine the impact on bonuses. An independent customer relations team challenged team leaders around performance.
- Explained how WCH operated an apprenticeship scheme to encourage jobs for local people. Whilst employment was not guaranteed at the end of an apprenticeship owing to the size of WCH, individuals tended to be promoted and retained within the organisation.
- Advised that there was a staff turnover in the in-house team of approximately 20% per annum. This often related to what was happening to wage growth in the private sector albeit there were greater benefits than being self-employed. WCH worked with West Herts College to help personnel secure NVQ qualifications to aid staff retention.
- Advised that if there were concerns about the WCH response on the telephone when people were reporting the need for repairs this would be examined.
- Explained how the repair service operated out of office hours. A 24- hour sub-contracted call centre was operational for people to report faults. A duty manager was available and with on-call staff to carry out the repairs. In serious cases the matter would be escalated to the executive. Work was also ongoing to make the service more effective.
- Advised that vulnerable people would be provided with heating if there was a fault and with compensation provided for any additional running costs. Re-housing to guest rooms and hotels would also be a possibility.

In these types of circumstances, steps would be taken to resolve the issues as quickly as possible.

- Informed the task group that there were no plans to change the policy of responding to heating or hot water faults in up to five days in the summer – this was a standard response across the sector. However, the vulnerable and those with a medical need would be dealt with more quickly. The situation would nevertheless be monitored; such as in relation to the impact of climate change on hot weather and the need for showering in the summer.

### **Feedback and customer service**

- Explained that approximately 2,000 completed customer satisfaction survey questionnaires were submitted by tenants following repair works. This figure representing around 15% of the total number of repairs carried out which was the normal response rate in the sector. There were differing channels to gain responses such as email and online as well as paper. Complaints were also examined to ascertain where improvements to services could be made.
- Advised how help was given to the older tenants to go online; such as the provision of tablets and grants to purchase equipment. WCH had a strategy of 'digital inclusion' but was not digital by default - recognising the need for other mediums for communication. WCH was part of the Watford Wi-Fi scheme and IT was available at the community hubs.
- Explained that monies were spent on tenant's audits to identify vulnerable people who were not digitally enabled. Work was ongoing to understand the characteristics of vulnerable tenants and tailoring services accordingly. WCH had good visibility on this issue.
- Informed the task group that complaints took, on average, eight days to resolve and outlined the various stages of the process. The ultimate recourse of a complainant was with the ombudsman.
- Explained how customer service by contractors was tested on the ground. This included shadowing in the workplace, employing contractors with similar values to WCH and carrying out joint inspections on staff. The largest contractor employed by WBC had a customer satisfaction rate of 95%.
- Agreed that employing 'mystery shopper' tactics was a good means of assessing quality of service. This approach had been adopted in the past and could be considered in the future.

The chair thanked the WBC Chief Executive and Housing Group Director of Operations for their contribution to the meeting and explained that they would be invited to a further session with members in January 2019; following the drop-in sessions and holding of the resident's survey. The Chief Executive asked that any case work coming to the attention of members be referred to Debbie

Casey at WCH, and that the further session with members again be focussed on WCH policy issues.

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## **Next steps**

### **A. Further meeting with Watford Community Housing**

It was agreed that the further meeting with Watford Community Housing should take place towards the end of January 2019.

Action: Committee and Scrutiny Support Officer (AG)

### **B. Residents' drop in sessions and survey**

Members agreed the questions for the residents' drop in sessions and online survey. They also took away posters publicising the sessions and survey for distribution in all WBC wards.

Actions:

- Publicise the drop in sessions and online survey on the WBC website and associated social media – Committee and Scrutiny Support Officer (AG) with the Communications Team.
- Provide task group members with a JPEG version of the A3 and A4 posters publicising the drop in sessions and survey – Committee and scrutiny Support Officer (AG).
- Provide all WBC members with an A4 poster to help in publicising the drop in sessions and survey – Committee and Scrutiny Support Officer (AG).
- Prepare a pro-forma containing the agreed questions for completion at the residents' drop in sessions – Committee and Scrutiny Support Officer (AG).
- Arrange for an officer to be present at the Watford Town Hall drop in session on 13 December – Committee and Scrutiny Support Officer (AG).

Chair  
Watford Community Housing Task  
Group

The meeting started at 6.30 p.m.  
and concluded at 8.20 p.m.

