



Watford Community Housing Task Group

February 2019

Contents

	Page
Task Group membership	3
Proposed recommendations	4
Background	5 - 6
Overview of the work	6 - 7
Recommendations and comments	7 - 11
Bibliography/background papers	12
Appendices	
A. Task group scope and proposal	

Task group members

Councillor Asif Khan
Councillor Aga Dychton
Councillor Amanda Grimston
Councillor Kareen Hastrick
Councillor Stephen Cavinder

Chair and Councillor for Leggatts Ward
Councillor for Central Ward
Councillor for Meriden Ward
Councillor for Meriden Ward
Councillor for Woodside Ward

Officer support

Alan Garside
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Committee and Scrutiny Support Officer
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External organisations

Watford Community Housing

Tina Barnard and Ben Johnson

Proposed key recommendations to present to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Watford Community Housing to:

Service charges

- provide information to residents explaining how to notify them when a service, included in their service charge, was not provided.
- communicate with tenants outlining the final adjustments to be made to their service charge following a service being paid for that was not provided as soon as possible after the matter was identified, and with full details included in the annual letter sent to residents providing information on the actual charges made for the previous financial year.

Maintenance

- work collaboratively with Hertfordshire County Council and Watford Borough Council to help improve local amenities for tenants and residents.
- arrange for repair or refurbishment works to properties to be carried out before mutually swapped or transferred to ensure they meet lettable standards and notify tenants on how long it will take to carry out the works.
- outline any major works that will be required, including when these will be completed and the property ready for habitation, when void properties are placed on the 'home choice letting' scheme.

Repairs

- complete repairs on the first visit to the satisfaction of tenants in 85% of cases with details published in the annual report.
- complete remaining repairs to the satisfaction of tenants within 30 days of the initial reporting in 95% of cases and include the outcomes in the annual report, and not close a case until the resident was content with the repair.
- include in the annual report, details of repairs that have taken longer than 30 days to complete and itemise the number of days taken.
- increase the number of inspections of repairs to 20% of those undertaken and report on those that were found to be unsatisfactory in the annual report.
- give any positive feedback received from tenants on repair works carried out to the person or team who carried out the repair and include information on the number of compliments received in the annual report.

Customer service

- ensure that records of tenants casework were comprehensive, timely and kept up to date, and seek to introduce a computerised central recording system during the next financial year.

Background

Watford Community Housing (WCH) is a charitable, not-for-profit housing association registered under the Co-operative and Benefit Societies Act 2014. It is regulated by the Regulator of Social Housing; which promotes a viable, efficient and well governed social housing sector able to deliver homes that meet a range of needs. WCH is a member of the National Housing Federation and has adopted the Federation's 2015 Code of Governance.

WCH owns over 5,000 homes across South-West Hertfordshire and is a Community Gateway organisation – a model that aims to give tenants and leaseholders more control over their homes and living environment.

WCH is governed by a board comprising tenants, leaseholders, independents and councillors. A Leadership Team, comprising the chief executive and directors, has responsibility for delivering the organisation's business plan. A Gateway Membership Team, made up of tenants and residents, has direct access to the board. All of WCH tenants, leaseholders and shared owners are eligible for full voting membership.

In November 2017, a local WCH resident appeared before the Council's Overview and Scrutiny Committee and raised a number of issues about WCH in relation to service charges and the performance of companies contracted to carry out maintenance work. He asked whether the Council could carry out a scrutiny in to these matters.

In view of the representations and other matters raised by WCH tenants with members, the committee invited Councillor's Hastrick and Khan to prepare a formal scrutiny proposal for consideration.

In the proposal, the councillor's advocated that the inquiry would be relevant to all Watford Borough residents who lived in a property managed by WCH and recommended that it would examine:

- the service provided to local residents,
- the key issues raised by residents to councillors,
- the service charges,
- performance by contactors, and;
- value for money.

The aim of the review would be to seek to influence WCH in introducing improvements to procedures and services - where it was considered these were required. The Overview and Scrutiny Committee agreed to convene the task group at its meeting in March 2018; with membership confirmed at the next meeting of the Committee in June.

In August, officers met with senior executives from WCH and agreed how the Council and WCH would work together to support members; including WCH providing information to, and attending meetings of, the task group.

Overview of the work

At the first meeting on 24 September, Councillor Khan was elected as Chair by the task group. The contents of documents supplied were noted and key areas for examination arising out of casework with tenants and other examples were identified.

To enable the task group to develop a fuller picture about the issues, members considered it important that WCH residents had the opportunity to give their views in relation to the areas under review. In this regard, they agreed to hold a number of drop-in sessions at various locations in the Borough during November and December where discussions could be held with residents.

In addition, a survey would be available on-line for residents to give their opinions. Both were to be publicised through information on the Council's website and social media, a press release and the distribution of posters.

Members agreed a series of key questions to be forwarded to WCH to enable further information to be available that would assist inquiries when they appeared before the task group at the next meeting on 17 October. The response from WCH was detailed and comprehensive and was gratefully received.

At the second meeting, WCH gave a presentation - that included information on digitalisation, what tenants thought of services provided, areas for improvement, service charges and value for money.

Members asked questions in areas as identified from the data assimilated. At the conclusion of the meeting, the task group determined the questions to be asked of residents at the drop-in sessions and within the on-line survey. It was agreed that WCH would be invited to appear again before the task group on 31 January 2019, following the consultation with residents.

The comments made by tenants at the drop in-sessions and in the on-line survey provided useful information from which members identified the themes for further inquiries of WCH at the January meeting. These related to service charges, maintenance, repairs and customers service.

At the meeting, members asked a broad range of questions and WCH was thanked for engaging so helpfully with the scrutiny process. Members discussed the conclusions and recommendations of the task group and the final activities to complete the scrutiny process.

During the inquiry, research work was carried out by officers to inform the task group and to produce this report.

Key recommendations and comments

Watford Community Housing to:

Service charges

- **provide information to residents explaining how to notify them when a service, included in their service charge, was not provided.**
- **communicate with tenants outlining the adjustments to be made to their service charge following a service being paid for that was not provided as soon as possible after the matter was identified, and with full details included in the annual letter sent to residents providing information on the actual charges made for the previous financial year.**

WCH recognised that, on occasion, a service charge was inadvertently made to a tenant for a service that was not provided. Whilst they sought to ensure that this did not occur, it was not always possible to prevent this. The majority of instances currently related to issues around the cleaning contract (which WCH was in the process of re-procuring). There had been ten occasions in the present financial year when financial credits had been issued to residents in respect of cleaning matters.

As residents may identify when a service had not been provided, it was agreed that it was important that they clearly understood the mechanism by which they could report such occurrences. This would assist WCH in monitoring performance by contractors and ensure appropriate reimbursement was made to tenants where appropriate. In this regard, WCH undertook to examine how best information could be made available to residents.

The task group also considered it would be beneficial to effected tenants (and good practice by WCH) that they should be informed as soon as possible after it was identified that a service was not provided of the adjustments that were to be made to their service charge - and that this should apply regardless of who identified the anomaly (WCH site inspection teams would also pick up on issues for example).

And to provide absolute clarity, members felt that full details of any credits made should be included in the 'statement of actual service charges' forwarded to residents annually providing information on the service charges paid in the previous financial year.

Maintenance

- **work collaboratively with Hertfordshire County Council and Watford Borough Council to help improve local amenities and the living environment for tenants and residents.**

There were occasions when WCH and local councils needed to work together in relation to the provision and maintenance of local amenities that they each had a responsibility for – such as in relation to the development of resident parking bays, the installation of post and rail fencing and the cutting of grass verges. The availability of the most suitable amenities would help improve the quality of the lives of tenants and provided for a conducive aesthetic environment.

For example, discussions revealed that there was a need for greater coordination in grass maintenance to avoid frustration amongst residents that this was cut to different heights and at varying times on land owned by the various agencies. Members were also aware of occasions when developments to infrastructure had been delayed or cancelled and were keen for this to be avoided in the future.

The task group concluded that WCH should work as closely as possible with Hertfordshire County Council and Watford Borough Council to ensure that projects were completed satisfactorily and that all possible steps were undertaken to synchronise activities.

- **arrange for repair or refurbishment works to properties to be carried out before mutually swapped or transferred to ensure they met lettable standards and notify tenants on how long it will take to carry out the works.**

A significant number of property exchanges were undertaken by tenants each year. There had been 350 internal transfers and 26 mutual swaps in the current financial year. Members considered it important that properties should be in a good state of repair and up to the same standard as newly let properties when the exchange took place.

At present, WCH conducted electricity and gas checks before any exchange and looked for any health and safety issues. They might also request a tenant to carry out any works that may be needed. Members considered that WCH should go further having regard to a duty of care for tenants. They believed that WCH should arrange for the refurbishment works to be undertaken - and either at the cost of the sitting tenant or to themselves where the tenant was not in a position to finance the repairs.

Members also considered that WCH should make clear to tenants at the outset how long it would take for the works to be completed so they were fully informed and able to organise their move or transfer more effectively.

- **outline any major works that will be required, including when these will be completed and when the property will be ready for habitation, when void properties were placed on the 'home choice letting' scheme.**

Members were aware of occasions when there were significant delays in tenants moving in to properties provided under the 'choice based lettings' scheme, due to major refurbishment works being undertaken resulting in them remaining in their existing, less suitable, properties for extended periods.

The task group felt that it would be desirable for WCH, when advertising properties under the scheme, to provide information on any works being undertaken and the date when these would be completed so that tenants could make a more informed decision as to whether to bid for the property; and avoid any potential difficulties in them making further applications.

Repairs

- **complete repairs on the first visit to the satisfaction of tenants in 85% of cases with details published in the annual report.**
- **complete remaining repairs to the satisfaction of tenants within 30 days of the initial reporting in 95% of cases and include the outcomes in the annual report, and not close a case until the resident was content with the repair.**
- **include in the annual report, details of repairs that have taken longer than 30 days to complete and itemise the number of days taken.**

WCH advised that it could be a challenge in ensuring that the correct trades' person was deployed to a premises on the first repair visit (resulting in the need for further visits). The completion of repairs was monitored as part of a resident's customer survey; with 80% of cases currently being resolved on the first occasion.

The task group felt that WCH should consider taking steps to improve the diagnosis carried out when a tenant reported the need for a repair so that the right individual was sent more frequently the first time. This would improve the service to tenants and reduce time wasted in the incorrect trade attending. Members considered the measures that might be undertaken included enhanced training of those receiving calls so that they elicited the most detailed information and ensuring the on-line reporting system asked the most appropriate questions.

They also felt that WCH should accelerate the multi-skilling of their employees who attended addresses as this would increase the likelihood of them being able to complete a repair on the first occasion.

In these circumstances, WCH could reasonably expect that more repairs would be completed first time and set a commensurate target (as has been recommended). Publication of the data would enable WCH to demonstrate their commitment to carrying out repairs as quickly as possible.

The task group believed that the existing WBC target of completing repairs within 30-days should be achieved in all cases (other than in exceptional of circumstances) - as this was a reasonably extensive period. As a result, they recommended that the

number of cases, when the objective was not met, be measured and reported on with a view to keeping such instances to a minimum.

Furthermore, they judged that a repair should not be 'closed' until a tenant was satisfied that the repair was fully completed; to avoid situations where an outstanding repair was re-opened as a 'new' case (and starting the 30-day period again) resulting in an inaccurate measurement of the time taken to complete the original repair.

- **increase the number of inspections of repairs to 20% of those undertaken and report on those that were found to be unsatisfactory in the annual report.**

At present, WCH inspected one in ten of repairs carried out to check on quality and suitability. The task group felt that this figure was not sufficient to provide a representative sample and ensure adequate monitoring of performance.

Members considered that the figure should be increased as this would provide a fuller picture of the standard of repairs and enable trends to be more effectively identified - and thereby assisting WCH to seek improvements to services where deemed necessary (and potentially leading to greater customer satisfaction). Reporting on the repairs that were found to be unsatisfactory would demonstrate transparency and confirm the organisation's commitment to improving quality.

- **give any positive feedback received from tenants on repair works carried out to the person or team who carried out the repair and include information on the number of compliments received in the annual report.**

The task group appreciated that trades persons would carry out high quality repairs of tenant's properties and felt that this work should be formally recognised. Members considered that WCH should publicise on its website how tenants and residents could report instances of good work so that WCH had the opportunity to congratulate and thank the person concerned - and publicise the number of compliments received in their annual report.

Customer service

- **ensure that records of tenants casework were comprehensive, timely and kept up to date, and seek to introduce a computerised central recording system during the next financial year.**

WCH explained that they were developing a central record keeping system for tenant casework notes documented by their staff. It was deemed a more efficient and leaner mechanism having customer interventions retained in one place. Members were encouraged by this approach; particularly as WCH considered that it would be prudent to make better use of IT systems to record activity.

The task group felt that any IT initiative should be prioritised as this would provide for more accurate and secure record keeping, improve access to information and the handover of cases between staff; and lead to an enhanced service to tenants and residents. Members considered that WCH should seek to fully introduce computerisation in the next financial year.

In addition, members were keen that records were as detailed and up to date as possible and were encouraged that WCH wanted their staff to understand the importance of record keeping and of the need to effectively input data.

Bibliography/background papers

Empowering Communities - the Community Gateway Model: a report advocating how tenants and leaseholders could have more control over their homes and living environment, 2003

<https://twoworlds.me/wp-content/uploads/2013/02/EmpoweringCommunities.pdf>

Watford Community Housing Annual Report 2017/18

<http://ourannualreport.co.uk/>

Watford Community Housing Business Plan 2016/2020

<https://www.wcht.org.uk/download.cfm?ver=3815>

Watford Community Housing Value for Money Strategy 2016/20

<https://www.wcht.org.uk/download.cfm?ver=2815>

Watford Community Housing Value for Money Self-Assessment 2016/17

<https://www.wcht.org.uk/download.cfm?ver=3469>

Websites for the following organisations

[Watford Community Housing](#)

[Regulator of Social Housing](#)

[Homes England](#)

[National Housing Federation](#)