



Social Housing Task Group

February 2024

Contents

	Page
Executive Summary	3
Task Group members and witnesses	4
Recommendations	5
Background to the task group	5
Overview of the task group's work	5
Recommendations and comments	6
Bibliography	8
Appendix	
1. Task group terms of reference	10

Executive Summary

The task group recognises the vital role that registered providers play in delivering much-needed affordable housing in the borough. The work to ensure a robust and urgent response to damp and mould issues in homes is imperative to protect the health of tenants. Recognising the challenging context that they are operating in, registered providers are nonetheless encouraged to make all necessary preparations to meet the incoming statutory requirements to meet these responsibilities. Raising awareness among tenants and staff of causes, signs and related processes to address these issues remain fundamental.

A multi-channel approach to communicating with all tenants, listening to their views and reporting back must remain the mainstay of registered providers' engagement. Openness to feedback and responding as needed has also been demonstrated as fundamental. Formal engagement structures can also provide important opportunities for tenants to participate in decision-making, highlight the issues that matter to them and undertake relevant scrutiny.

This report reflects the value of organisational cultures and processes which are tenant-centric and focused on openness and compassion. These approaches increase tenant satisfaction, reduce complaints and protect the most vulnerable. They also create strong foundations for partnership working where opportunities and challenges are recognised and lead to continuous improvement. All registered providers are encouraged to continue to ensure that empathy and responsiveness remain central to their approach and that this is embedded at every level of the organisation.

Task group members

Councillor Asif Khan	Chair, Councillor for Leggatts Ward
Councillor Karen Clarke-Taylor	Councillor for Oxhey Ward
Councillor Marilyn Devonish	Councillor for Central Ward
Councillor Amanda Grimston	Councillor for Meriden Ward
Councillor Penelope Hill	Councillor for Park Ward

Officer support

Jodie Kloss	Senior Democratic Services Officer
Laura MacMillan	Democratic Services Officer

Witnesses

Peter Cogan	Group Director of Customer Services, Watford Community Housing
Helen Town	Group Director of Property and Partnerships, Watford Community Housing

Written submissions

Paradigm Housing and Sanctuary Housing

Recommendations

Property maintenance and repairs

1. Establish clear guidelines for tenants and staff on responsibilities for different types of repairs.
2. Ensure that repair works are categorised based on urgency and safety, taking tenant vulnerabilities into account, including mental health issues.
3. Undertake proactive inspections, within the bounds of legal constraints, to identify common issues in certain types of property and to understand where vulnerabilities exist in order to support appropriate prioritisation.
4. Undertake long-term planning of the cyclical maintenance programmes within housing stock, which reflect statutory requirements.

Damp and mould

5. Emphasise to staff and tenants the importance of addressing damp and mould issues promptly to protect tenant health.
6. Implement a standard procedure for dealing with reports of damp and mould, ensuring prompt and effective action.
7. Make necessary preparations in systems and processes to comply with the incoming Awaab's Law, adapting, where needed, to the challenges of the current operating environment.

Service Delivery and Satisfaction

8. Conduct thorough reviews of the processes which result in dissatisfaction among tenants.
9. Focus on continuous improvement in service delivery to meet and exceed tenant satisfaction targets.

Tenant Engagement and Communication

10. Develop strategies to engage with under-represented groups of tenants.
11. Ensure all tenants are informed about how to report concerns effectively.
12. Implement regular communication channels:
 - a. to update and inform tenants and stakeholders about the progress and outcomes of initiatives and strategies.

- b. for tenants to provide feedback and participate in decision-making processes.

Background to the task group

Following the tragic death of two-year-old Awaab Ishak caused by prolonged exposure to mould in his home in Rochdale in 2020, there has been increased focus on damp and mould, particularly in the social rented sector.

In light of this, in February 2023 Overview and Scrutiny Committee invited Watford Community Housing to attend a meeting and provide an update on their response to any damp and mould issues in their properties. Watford Community Housing are the largest registered provider of social housing in Watford. The committee recommended that a task group be established to consider repairs, damp and mould, and tenant engagement within the social rented sector in Watford.

Overview of the task group's programme of work

The task group met four times between November 2023 and January 2024. At the initial meeting, members reviewed and discussed key background information.

The task group then held two evidence sessions to which a number of the largest local registered providers of social housing were invited. Watford Community Housing attended these sessions with two other providers submitting responses to a questionnaire that had been circulated as an alternative. Overall, the task group received responses from registered providers who together supply 68% of the social rented homes in Watford. The task group is grateful to all the providers who contributed and particular thanks are extended to the team at Watford Community Housing for their time and thoughtful and open approach.

During the first evidence session, the task group focused on repairs, damp and mould. Watford Community Housing's presentation covered repairs and response to damp and mould, and tenant satisfaction. The task group discussed various ways providers could raise awareness about these issues, how all staff could be trained to identify and address damp and mould, and how vulnerable tenants could be supported.

During the second evidence session, the task group considered tenant engagement and how residents in social rented properties were able to interact with their landlord. The presentation delivered by Watford Community Housing covered tenant engagement, response to tenant priorities, recent learning and action taken, digital exclusion, and complaints.

At the final meeting, members considered their conclusions and recommendations.

The task group scope is attached as appendix 1 to this report.

Additional work was carried out by Democratic Services to inform the task group's work and to produce this report.

Recommendations and comments

Recommendations

The recommendations from this review are relevant to all social housing providers operating in Watford. The task group commends the good practice that was demonstrated in the course of this review. These recommendations capture this existing good practice as well as some areas for development to be considered.

Property Maintenance and Repairs

1. Establish clear guidelines for tenants and staff on responsibilities for different types of repairs.
2. Ensure that repair works are categorised based on urgency and safety, taking tenant vulnerabilities into account, including mental health issues.
3. Undertake proactive inspections, within the bounds of legal constraints, to identify common issues in certain types of property and to understand where vulnerabilities exist in order to support appropriate prioritisation.
4. Undertake long-term planning of the cyclical maintenance programmes within housing stock, which reflect statutory requirements.

Ensuring that homes remain in good order protects the living standards, health and satisfaction levels of tenants. Clear guidelines setting out who is responsible for addressing different types of issues benefits both tenants and landlords and manages expectations. All repairs must be assessed against criteria to ensure the safety of tenants and protecting the building. The task group particularly wanted to highlight the needs of those with vulnerabilities, including mental ill health, who might have different needs from other tenants.

Registered providers should use their knowledge of their housing stock, and in particular any known issues with certain types of structures, to address any repairs and maintenance issues. Such inspections, carried out within the legal framework for entering tenants' homes, will also assist with the identification of vulnerable tenants, including those who do not routinely grant access to the landlord, and for whom additional support might be beneficial.

Rolling repairs programmes are welcomed to maintain the stock and protect against future repairs issues. Works focused on energy efficiency of homes are particularly welcome given the challenges of the cost-of-living and climate crises as well as helping to prevent damp and mould.

Damp and mould

5. Emphasise to staff and tenants the importance of addressing damp and mould issues promptly to protect tenant health.
6. Implement a standard procedure for dealing with reports of damp and mould, ensuring prompt and effective action.
7. Make necessary preparations in systems and processes to comply with the incoming Awaab's Law, adapting, where needed, to the challenges of the current operating environment.

All landlords, including registered providers of social housing, should understand their responsibility to identify and address the underlying causes of damp and mould, including structural issues or inadequate ventilation.

Training is vital; all representatives of registered providers who visit homes should be vigilant for signs of damp and mould and respond appropriately.

Registered providers have already utilised a variety of ways to inform tenants about the signs, causes and ways of reporting any concerns around damp and mould. These have included magazine articles, the Big Door Knock, emails and leaflets.

As with repairs, the vulnerabilities of tenants should be taken into account when a concern around damp and mould is raised.

The government has launched a consultation on the introduction of Awaab's Law which proposes introducing new strict time limits for social housing providers and force them to take swift action in addressing dangerous hazards such as damp and mould.

It proposes new legal requirements for social landlords to investigate hazards within 14 days, start fixing within a further 7 days, and make emergency repairs within 24 hours. Those landlords who fail can be taken to court where they may be ordered to pay compensation.

The task group recognises that the requirements under this proposal are likely to be challenging for registered providers. The complexities of compliance in the current context, with labour and materials shortages, are recognised and registered providers are encouraged to adapt as needed to continue to maintain safe homes for their tenants.

Service delivery and satisfaction

8. Conduct thorough reviews of the processes which result in dissatisfaction among tenants.
9. Focus on continuous improvement in service delivery to meet and exceed tenant satisfaction targets.

Tenant satisfaction levels will be measured and published in the incoming Tenant Satisfaction Measures which all registered providers will be required to report from late 2024.¹ Similar satisfaction measures have also been the subject of internal key performance indicators among registered providers.

Reviewing ways of working and implementing new processes to improve service delivery and increase tenant satisfaction is best undertaken as a collaborative approach. Tenants and partners should be engaged in these reviews and remain part of the work to maintain standards. A clear liaison person between registered providers and each local authority where they operate would be welcome. Learning from best practice elsewhere in the sector, particularly given the forthcoming statutory requirements, will remain an important tool in this regard.

Data and feedback from tenants and partners should be used to monitor the effectiveness of implemented changes and policies and changes made accordingly.

Tenant Engagement and Communication

10. Develop strategies to engage with under-represented groups of tenants.
11. Ensure all tenants are informed about how to report concerns effectively.
12. Implement regular communication channels:
 - to update and inform tenants and stakeholders about the progress and outcomes of initiatives and strategies.
 - for tenants to provide feedback and participate in decision-making processes.

Engaging with all tenants is vital to understanding their concerns and priorities. It is recommended that engagement methods, including formal tenant structures, are reviewed to ensure that they represent the diversity of tenants and of the housing stock. Strategies should then be developed to address any gaps.

A multi-faceted approach to communicating with tenants, listening to their views and reporting back should remain a strength of local social housing providers. Such an approach will include letters and leaflets, emails, text messages, phone calls and face-to-face conversations. Registered providers are also encouraged to identify tenants who have not made contact for a long time and to follow up to ensure their wellbeing as well as to ensure that their home is in a good state of repair.

The task group also underlined the importance of making information accessible to those for whom English is not their first language. Staff members who speak additional languages will be well-placed to support this approach.

¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/consultation-on-the-introduction-of-tenant-satisfaction-measures/outcome/tenant-satisfaction-measures-summary-of-rsh-requirements-accessible>

The task group wishes to extend their thanks to all those who contributed to this review. It was a positive and thought-provoking process and was intended to provide a timely review of social housing provision in Watford.

Bibliography/background papers

- Report to Overview and Scrutiny Committee – [New Scrutiny Task Group – Social Housing Task Group](#) – July 2023
- Housing Ombudsman Service - [One year on follow up report: Spotlight on damp and mould – it’s not lifestyle](#)
- [Overview of Tenant Satisfaction Measures](#)
- Various policy and process documents – Paradigm Housing
- Various policy and process documents – Sanctuary Housing
- Various policy and process documents and newsletters - Watford Community Housing

**Appendix:
Watford Borough Council Overview and Scrutiny Committee
Scrutiny Task Group Scope and Terms of Reference**

Scrutiny review title	Tenants' experiences in social housing
Scrutiny proposer	Overview and Scrutiny Committee
Details of specific area for review	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Any interim data for tenant satisfaction measures programme (note first results to be published Autumn 2024). • Responsiveness to repair requests. • Review of the damp and mould processes. • Effectiveness of Gateway structure, or similar tenant engagement processes, in engagement and tenant-led scrutiny.
Why this has been proposed for review, including the council priorities it supports	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • WCH owns and manages over 5,300 homes in Watford and other providers also own many units. • National issues around damp and mould. • Understand tenants' views and how these are taken forward.
Purpose / objectives of the review, including key questions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How well are tenants' views understood and acted upon? • How successful are the tenant-engagement structures and processes? • How effectively are complaints dealt with? • How robust are the measures in place to respond to issues with damp and mould?
Any areas excluded from the scope	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Individual casework.
Desired outcomes / indicators of success	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A wider understanding of the context of the social rented sector in Watford. • An understanding of complaints processes. • An understanding of repairs processes. • An understanding of the response to issues with damp and mould within the social rented sector. • Developing recommendations which contribute to resident satisfaction in the social rented sector.
Timescale and key dates, including proposed meeting format	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Task group to be established in July 2023. • Consider a scrutiny in a day approach, October 2023. • To go to WBC Cabinet and the social housing providers in January 2024.

Key departmental lead officer	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Justine Hoy, Associate Director of Housing and Wellbeing • Liz Smale, Housing Strategy Officer • Joanna Harding, Environmental Health Manager
Witnesses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Representatives of WCH and other registered providers • Cabinet member for Housing
What activities need to be taken to achieve the outcomes?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reviewing background briefing on social housing landscape in Watford. • Review of relevant WCH and other providers' policies on: repairs, housing maintenance complaints, management of damp and mould issues. • Review of feedback from tenant engagement structures.
Key policies / documentation / baseline information needed	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Background briefing on establishment of WCH and how the relationship is managed. • Briefing on tenants' satisfaction measures • WCH Customer Experience Strategy • WCH complaints and escalation process
Any other sources of evidence (e.g., site visit)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Any previous consultations run with social tenants.
Risks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of involvement of social housing providers in working with local councillors to address residents' needs and concerns. • Lack of opportunity to ensure robustness to damp and mould agenda.