



WATFORD COMMUNITY HOUSING TRUST TASK GROUP

REVIEW OF SERVICES PROVIDED BY WATFORD COMMUNITY HOUSING TRUST

SEPTEMBER 2013

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COMMITTEE MEMBERSHIP

Watford Borough Council

Members - Task Group

Councillor Asif Khan	Chair of the Task Group and Councillor for Leggatts Ward
Councillor Karen Collett	Councillor for Woodside Ward
Councillor Jackie Connal	Councillor for Holywell Ward
Councillor Stephen Johnson	Councillor for Leggatts Ward
Councillor Anne Joynes	Councillor for Leggatts Ward

Other Members attending

Councillor Ian Brandon	Councillor for Callowland Ward
Councillor Ian Brown	Councillor for Woodside Ward
Councillor Kelly McLeod	Councillor for Tudor Ward

External Support and Information

Tina Barnard	Chief Executive, Watford Community Housing Trust
Gareth Lewis	Director of Property and New Business, Watford Community Housing Trust
Loreen Herzig	Head of Customer Insight, Watford Community Housing Trust
Sue Pelton	Executive Assistant, Watford Community Housing Trust

Officer Support

Watford Borough Council

Sandra Hancock	Committee and Scrutiny Officer
Rosy Wassell	Committee and Scrutiny Support Officer

PROPOSED RECOMMENDATIONS TO PRESENT TO OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Proposed Recommendations:

COMMUNICATION

1. All new tenants should be visited by an officer of the Trust to ensure that they are satisfied with their living arrangements
2. To inform residents that their neighbourhood teams are available to clarify any issues
3. The handbook must be made more user-friendly, updated regularly and accessible to all residents
4. To improve clarity in presentation of bills sent to residents ensuring that all charges are clearly itemised
5. To provide a clear process for residents to query any charges with which they disagree
6. To reduce the waiting time for residents to an 'industry acceptable' service. The telephone should be answered within six rings.
7. A free phone number should be introduced for residents to call the Trust
8. The Trust website must be updated daily to ensure its contact details are current
9. The Trust website must reflect the needs of its tenants and its aims and strategies
10. Staff who communicate with residents must have regular training
11. A clear process needs to be put in place where vulnerable residents are recognised and services provided to them to meet their individual needs.
12. The process to communicate with vulnerable residents must be clear. Staff should be proactive in dealing with vulnerable residents.

SERVICE CHARGES

13. Service Charges must be constantly reviewed.
14. Service Charges should be itemised for each individual property and items clearly defined.

REPAIRS

15. The 'first time' satisfaction rate must be increased substantially
16. A much more vigorous monitoring of contractors by managers must be undertaken
17. Residents to be positively encouraged to return satisfaction surveys
18. The Trust must be much more accountable to its residents and stakeholders

PERFORMANCE

19. The Trust should demonstrate to tenants that they are working towards joining the top quartile group of its peers.
20. The Trust should reaffirm its commitment that the development of 500 new homes in the areas of Watford and Three Rivers by 2016 is a main objective of its business plan.

The Task Group would like to acknowledge that Watford Community Housing Trust had achieved some good results in the five years of their administration. They have noted compliments received from tenants who have praised the good quality of sheltered accommodation and the helpful attitude of many members of staff at the Trust's Clarendon Road offices.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

At the meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 21 November 2012 Councillor Khan said that he would like to propose a review on the Watford Community Housing Trust (WCHT) as between 40% and 50% of his casework related to the Trust.

The Committee and Scrutiny Officer advised that she would circulate the proposal form to Members interested in taking part.

It was anticipated that the review would produce the following outcomes:

- An improvement in the quality of service provided by the WCHT for repairs
- A review of the policies in place regarding vulnerable residents
- A review of the ways in which WCHT communicated with all stakeholders

In order to obtain relevant evidence it was proposed that:

- Feedback be obtained from local residents through a survey
- Interviews be conducted with residents
- A check should be made of Performance data

The Task Group would comprise:

Councillor Asif Khan (Proposer)	–	Councillor for Leggatts Ward
Councillor Karen Collett	–	Councillor for Woodside Ward
Councillor Jackie Connal	–	Councillor for Holywell Ward
Councillor Stephen Johnson	–	Councillor for Leggatts Ward
Councillor Anne Joynes	–	Councillor for Leggatts Ward

SUMMARY OF MEETINGS

First Meeting - 16 April 2013

Councillor Khan was elected Chair.

Members agreed that the following information would be useful:

- How complaints from tenants were dealt with – whether a form were available for tenants to use to feed back on contractors' repair work
- Whether there was any form of quality control for work – what internal checks and control systems were in place
- What procedures and policies were in place to help vulnerable residents
- What procedures were employed by residents when they had a complaint, the quality of the response and whether the matter was satisfactorily resolved
- An understanding of procedure regarding void properties, specifically the process for making the property available for new tenants

Members discussed the recently introduced service charges; there had been considerable casework for ward councillors associated with these charges and Members considered that greater clarity in the Trusts' communication was required.

Information Gathering:

Members agreed that information could be gained through:

- A survey of residents
- The Trust's annual report
- An informal meeting between Members and residents to discuss issues on which residents had concerns.

The following ACTIONS were AGREED:

1. That Members devise a survey for residents asking for their views on:

- Communication with the Trust
- Repairs
- Complaints
- What the Trust does well and what could be improved

Members to format questions and email to other members of the task group by the following week.

2. Service Charges:

- To request clarity from the Trust on what the service charges cover.
- It was agreed that different areas of the borough would require different letters on this issue.

3. Informal meetings:

- Members to collect information at the informal meetings and then collate responses.

The minutes for this meeting can be found in Appendix 2 to this report

Second Meeting - 30 May 2013

Tenants had been invited to attend an informal meeting with Members to bring to their attention any problems they may have encountered in dealing with the Trust.

Attendees were given survey forms to fill in and the results analysed.

At least 30 members of the public attended the meeting and 30 completed forms were received.

Below is a brief summary of responses:

- 19 responses indicated that tenants were unhappy with the Trusts' housing repairs service
- 23 respondents were unsatisfied with the way their issues were dealt with by the Trust
- 24 people said that they would be willing to complete a satisfaction slip
- 28 respondents felt that individual letters should be sent to tenants with clearer information regarding the service charges

Full details of the Residents' survey can be found in Appendices 6, 7 and 8 of this report.

Third Meeting - 30 July 2013

Members had noted the results of the residents' survey forms.

The Task Group noted that attendees had raised the following points:

- Communications: Tenants considered that information in the Trusts' communications was frequently difficult to understand
- Void properties: Tenants had made complaints that repairs had not been completed prior to their moving into new properties.
- Quality Control: Tenants had stated that staff did not check that repairs were satisfactorily completed and that contractors did not arrive at the appointed time.
- Satisfaction slips: Tenants would like to fill in a satisfaction slip once work had been completed.

Members agreed to invite members of the Trust's board to a meeting in order to discuss areas in which they considered that tenants were experiencing problems.

Members compiled a list of questions which included queries on communication, service charges and repairs.

The minutes for this meeting can be found in Appendix 3 to this report

Fourth Meeting - 21 August 2013

The Task Group had invited members of the Watford Community Housing Trust to this meeting. Tina Barnard, Chief Executive of the Trust, Gareth Lewis, Director of Property and New Business and Loreen Herzig, Head of Customer Insight, were able to attend.

The Trust's representatives replied to Members' questions on:

- Aims and Strategies
- Communication
- Service Charges
- Repairs
- Social Enterprise

The minutes for this meeting can be found in Appendix 4 to this report

Fifth Meeting - 3 September 2013

Members discussed the meeting with the Watford Community Housing Trust's representatives and the answers they had received.

The questions and answers received by the Trust were considered and the Task Group drew up the list of recommendations which they hoped to present to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 26th September.

The minutes for this meeting can be found in Appendix 5 to this report

RECOMMENDATIONS AND COMMENTS

COMMUNICATION

Recommendation 1 ~ All new tenants should be visited by an officer of the Trust to ensure that they are satisfied with their living arrangements

The Task Group learnt that problems had arisen for tenants who had moved into Trust properties. Examples included difficulty in reading meters, faults in properties and complaints that issues were not resolved prior to the tenancy starting. The Task Group concluded that all new tenants should receive a visit from an officer to ensure that they are finding their homes satisfactory. Any problems could then be dealt with as soon as possible.

It would also be helpful if the Neighbourhood teams visited on a regular basis to remain aware of any problems the tenants were experiencing.

Recommendation 2 ~ To inform residents that their neighbourhood teams are available to clarify any issues

The Trust 's Chief Executive had stated that any communication with tenants must be legally binding and that tenants could request help from the neighbourhood teams or from the Citizens' Advice Bureau. The Task Group considered that tenants should be fully aware that neighbourhood teams could assist them in clarifying any issues which were unclear.

Recommendation 3 ~ The handbook must be made more user-friendly, updated regularly and accessible to all residents

At the meeting with the Task Group, the Trust's Director of Property and New Business advised that a new tenant should take an 'opening' meter reading using the tenants' handbook. One Task Group member, however, noted that instructions for using certain equipment were incorrect.

The Task Group was also concerned that not every resident could access the contents of the handbook (some residents had sight problems or were unable to read). It was felt that the handbook should be accessible to all and that special attention be given to the needs of vulnerable tenants.

Regular updating would necessarily mean that tenants could be regularly supplied with new handbooks or at least updated information in accessible form.

Recommendation 4 ~ To improve clarity in presentation of bills sent to residents ensuring that all charges are clearly itemised

Residents find bills sent by the Trust convoluted and unclear. They frequently cause tenants anxiety and stress leading some tenants to believe that they have been charged twice for the same service. The Task Group felt that bills should be much clearer and should be fully itemised. It was considered that bills should be individualised, to take into account not only individual properties but also the needs of vulnerable tenants.

Recommendation 5 ~ To provide a clear process for residents to query any charges with which they disagree

It was understood that some tenants had had difficulty understanding bills they were sent. It was frequently believed that they had been charged the incorrect amount. In addition they had found difficulty in obtaining answers to their queries.

Recommendation 6 ~ To reduce the waiting time for residents to an 'industry acceptable' service. The telephone should be answered within six rings.

Tenants had advised that they had received no response when telephoning the Trust.

The Trust had informed that it took an average of 89 seconds for a caller to speak to the member of staff who could deal with their enquiry. This was considered to be far too long; it was imperative that this be improved upon.

Recommendation 7 ~ A free phone number should be introduced for residents to call the Trust

This initiative would be helpful for tenants who had difficulty accessing the Trust.

Recommendation 8 ~ The Trust website must be updated daily to ensure its contact details are current

Members noted that the website frequently displayed out of date information.

Recommendation 9 ~ The Trust website must reflect the needs of its tenants and its aims and strategies

Both Tenants and members of the Task Group had found the website difficult to access and to navigate.

Recommendation 10 ~ Staff who communicate with residents must have regular training

Councillors noted that they had received complaints from residents who had felt intimidated by staff at the Trust. Tenants who had attended the 'drop in' session had made similar complaints. The Task Group considered that it was important that staff had regular 'customer facing' training which should also include training in diversity awareness.

Recommendation 11 ~ A clear process needs to be put in place where vulnerable residents are recognised and services provided to them to meet their individual needs.

It was noted that tenants of the Trust had greatly varying needs. In addition to regular training in dealing with customers, staff should have additional training in order to effectively deal with the individual needs of vulnerable tenants.

Recommendation 12 ~ The process to communicate with vulnerable residents must be clear. Staff should be proactive in dealing with vulnerable residents.

At a meeting with the Task Group, the Trust's Chief Executive advised, that WCHT had profile information on all tenants; this was regularly updated. The Task Group appreciate that a number of the Trust's tenants could be classed as 'vulnerable' and consequently needed specialised help in order for them to access services.

The Task noted that bills appeared to be unclear in general. This was an even greater problem for vulnerable residents: e.g. those who had difficulty reading the bills or had other disabilities. It was considered that staff work more proactively in order to ensure clear communication with all tenants.

SERVICE CHARGES

Recommendation 13 ~ Service Charges must be constantly reviewed.

The Task Group recognises that Service Charges have caused great anxiety and concern to residents and that some tenants had been charged for services they had not received. The Task Group agreed that greater clarity with regard to the charges was imperative.

Recommendation 14 ~ Service Charges should be itemised for each individual property and items clearly defined.

Fully itemised bills would ensure that tenants paid only for services which they had received. Where tenants had been charged for services for which they had not been provided, full and immediate refunds should be made.

REPAIRS

Recommendation 15~ The 'first time' satisfaction rate must be increased substantially

The Trust's target for achieving a satisfactory result first time was 75%. In actuality, 74.9% had been achieved. The Task Group felt that this was unacceptable and must be substantially increased.

The Task Group recommended that the Trust take a more professional attitude towards residents' repairs. A letter to tenants prior to the first visit would be advisable and also a telephone call to let the tenant know the contractor was en route.

Recommendation 16~ A much more vigorous monitoring of contractors by managers must be undertaken

According to tenants at the 'drop in' session, the staff did not check that repairs were completed satisfactorily. Other residents had reported that contractors had sometimes arrived without a prior appointment.

The Task Group felt that the Trust should more fully monitor completion of work. This would include the return of feedback forms from tenants.

Recommendation 17~ Residents to be positively encouraged to return satisfaction surveys

Tenants at the 'drop in' session had stated that they would like to fill in a satisfaction slip after work had been completed. The Task Group agreed that in order to ensure that tenants' views were taken into consideration, they should be positively encouraged to advise on completed work.

One Member suggested that every contractor be supplied with a survey form which he could give to the tenants once work had been finalised. The contractor should also encourage the tenants to return the slip.

It was agreed that the satisfaction slips should be graded by the Trust.

Recommendation 18 ~ The Trust must be much more accountable to its residents and stakeholders

Members considered that the repairs service was inadequate and that the Trust's priority should be towards management of buildings and homes with less involvement in community issues.

Recommendation 19 ~ The Trust should demonstrate to tenants that they are working towards joining the top quartile group of its peers.

When the Trust is benchmarked with the peer group top quartile its performance is poor. Last year it performed consistently below this standard. Members felt that this is an area the Trust must address.

Recommendation 20 ~ The Trust should reaffirm its commitment that the development of 500 new homes in the areas of Watford and Three Rivers by 2016 is a main objective of its business plan.

Members were concerned that at the Task Group's meeting with the Trust, the term "aspiration" was used.

BIBLIOGRAPHY AND APPENDICES

Bibliography

The following documents were found to be useful:

1. Report to Cabinet 18 February 2013:

<http://watford.moderngov.co.uk/documents/s4348/Report%20of%20the%20Executive%20Director%20Services.pdf>

2. Watford Community Housing Trust Internal Audit 2012:

<http://watford.moderngov.co.uk/documents/s4349/Appendix%20I.pdf>

3. WBC Housing Strategy 2008 – 2011 / 2008 – 2013:

<http://watford.moderngov.co.uk/Data/Call-In%20and%20Performance%20Scrutiny%20Committee/20090924/Agenda/att2980.pdf>

Appendices:

- Appendix 1: Task Group scope
- Appendix 2: Minutes 16 April 2013
- Appendix 3: Minutes 20 July 2013
- Appendix 4: Minutes 21 August 2013
- Appendix 5: Draft Minutes 3 September 2013
- Appendix 6: Residents' Survey 30 May 2013
- Appendix 7: Residents' Survey summary of responses
- Appendix 8: Residents' Survey additional comments
- Appendix 9: Cabinet minutes 18 February 2013

Suggestions for topics to be scrutinised – evaluation table

A Member, Officer or member of the public suggesting a topic for scrutiny must complete Section1 as fully as possible. Completed tables will be presented to Overview & Scrutiny for consideration.

Section 1 – Scrutiny Suggestion	
Proposer: Councillor Asif Khan	
<p>Topic recommended for scrutiny:</p> <p><i>Please include as much detail as is available about the specific such as;</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>areas which should be <u>included</u> in the review.</i> • <i>areas which should be <u>excluded</u> from the review.</i> • <i>Whether the focus should be on past performance, future policy or both.</i> 	<p style="text-align: center;"><i>Give details</i></p> <p>The area of scrutiny is the quality of service provided by Watford Community Housing Trust to local residents. Including areas of repairs.</p> <p>Other areas that need to be looked at include the introduction of the service charges by the WCHT and its financial impact on residents and how the charges will affect the quality of service level.</p> <p>What policies are in place to improve this and the levels of control the WCHT has in place to resolve complaints.</p> <p>How does the WCHT communicate to all stakeholders, including residents, tenants, councillors and council officials.</p>
<p>Why have you recommended this topic for scrutiny?</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><i>Give details</i></p> <p>Much of my casework involves dealing with residents’ complaints about the poor level of repairs. It also includes service that is received from the WCHT. There have been a number of examples where the most vulnerable have had poor service which resulted in an anxious time for them.(for example, a pensioner on means tested benefit without heating for 4 days during the snow. A family with young children without heating or hot water for 5 days)</p>

<p>What are the specific outcomes you wish to see from the review?</p> <p><i>Examples might include:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>To identify what is being done and what the potential barriers are;</i> • <i>To review relevant performance indicators;</i> • <i>To compare our policies with those of a similar authority;</i> • <i>To assess the environmental/social impacts;</i> • <i>To Benchmark current service provision;</i> • <i>To find out community perceptions and experience;</i> • <i>To identify the gap between provision and need</i> 	<p style="text-align: center;"><i>Give details</i></p> <p>To see an improvement for the quality of service provided by the WCHT on repairs.</p> <p>To review the policies in place regarding vulnerable residents.</p> <p>To review the ways in which The WCHT communicates with all stakeholders.</p>
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<p>How do you think evidence might be obtained?</p> <p><i>Examples might include</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Questionnaires/Surveys • Site visits • Interviewing witnesses • Research • Performance data • Public hearings • Comparisons with other local authorities 	<p style="text-align: right;"><i>Give details</i></p> <p>Feedback from local residents.</p> <p>Interviews of tenants (some maybe willing to come to the meetings and pass on their comments)</p> <p>Check performance data.</p> <p>Feedback from survey</p>
<p>Does the proposed item meet the following criteria?</p>	
<p>It must affect a group or community of people</p>	<p style="text-align: right;"><i>Give details</i></p> <p>It impacts WCHT tenants and residents who live in areas where the WCHT now manages.</p>
<p>It must relate to a service, event or issue in which the council has a significant stake</p>	<p style="text-align: right;"><i>Give details</i></p> <p>It relates to the management of the housing stock and the areas which the WCHT now looks after which was once done by the council.</p>

<p>It must not have been a topic of scrutiny within the last 12 months</p> <p><i>There will be exceptions to this arising from notified changing circumstances. Scrutiny will also maintain an interest in the progress of recommendations and issues arising from past reports.</i></p>	<p>NA</p> <p><i>Please confirm</i></p>
<p>It must not be an issue, such as planning or licensing, which is dealt with by another council committee</p>	<p>NA</p> <p><i>Please confirm</i></p>
<p>Does the topic meet the council's priorities?</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Making Watford a better place to live in ✓ 2. To provide the lead for Watford's sustainable economic growth 3. Promoting an active, cohesive and well informed Town ✓ 4. To operate the Council efficiently and effectively <p><i>Please confirm which ones</i></p>

<p>Are you aware of any limitations of time, other constraints or risks which need to be taken into account?</p> <p><i>Factors to consider are:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>forthcoming milestones, demands on the relevant service area and member availability:</i> • <i>imminent policy changes either locally, regionally or nationally within the area under review.</i> 	<p style="text-align: right;"><i>Include details</i></p> <p>There is an introduction of the WCHT service charges. Service charges will be introduced in April 2013 Ground maintenance charges will be introduced in April 2014</p>
<p>Does the topic involve a Council partner or other outside body?</p>	<p style="text-align: right;"><i>Include details</i></p> <p>It involves the Watford Community Housing Trust.</p>

<p>Are there likely to be any Equality implications which will need to be considered?</p> <p><i>Protected characteristics under the Equality Act 2010 are:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Age</i> • <i>Disability</i> • <i>Gender reassignment</i> • <i>Pregnancy or maternity</i> • <i>Race</i> • <i>Religion or belief</i> • <i>Sex</i> • <i>Sexual orientation</i> • <i>Marriage or civil partnership (only in respect of the requirement to have due regard to the need to eliminate discrimination)</i> 	<p>An impact of quality of services and repairs needs to involve whether certain groups with protected characteristics are being affected over the other.</p>
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<p>Sign off <i>(It is expected that any Councillor proposing a topic agreed by Overview and Scrutiny Committee will participate in the Task Group)</i></p>	
<p>Councillor/Officer Asif Khan</p>	<p>Date 23/01/13</p>

WATFORD COMMUNITY HOUSING TRUST TASK GROUP

16 April 2013

Present: Councillor Khan (Chair)
Councillors Collett, Connal and Joynes

Officers: Committee and Scrutiny Officer
Committee and Scrutiny Support Officer (RW)

1. ELECTION OF CHAIR

The Task Group was asked to elect a Chair for the Task Group.

AGREED

that Councillor Khan be elected Chair of the Watford Community Housing Trust Task Group.

2. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies had been received from Councillor Johnson.

3. DISCLOSURES OF INTEREST

There were no disclosures of interest.

4. SCRUTINY PROPOSAL – WATFORD COMMUNITY HOUSING TRUST

The Committee and Scrutiny Officer explained the documents with which the Task Group members had been supplied.

The Committee and Scrutiny Officer referred to the Performance Data report, which had been presented to Call-in and Performance Scrutiny Committee in 2009. She advised that much of the information was now out of date; the Housing Trust intended to update this information to provide performance statistics and benchmarking. She added that the Councillors' news sheet had been included and said that the Trust had asked whether the Task Group would like any other information to be forwarded as background information.

The Chair stressed that the group was keen to work with the Trust as it was felt that officers performed well. He added however, that some local residents had raised specific concerns.

Further Information considered necessary to carry out the review

Councillor Collett noted that it would be useful to obtain information on how complaints from tenants were dealt with. She asked whether a form were available for tenants to use in order to feed back on repair work by contractors.

Councillor Joynes questioned whether there was any form of quality control for work provided.

The Chair said that it would be wise to ascertain what procedures and policies were in place to aid vulnerable residents such as the very young or the elderly. He added that the Task Group should also identify what procedures were put in place to remedy problems.

Members commented on individual situations where problems had not been resolved in timely fashion.

Councillor Connal explained that residents were unsure whom to contact in order to achieve a speedy result; Councillor Joynes considered that timeframes for completion of work should be written into the service level agreement.

Councillor Collett said that it would be useful to know which tenants had recently requested repair work and what their experience had been. She added that in the event that tenants had had cause for complaint it would be instructive to know what procedures they had employed to complain, the quality of response and whether the matter had been resolved to the resident's satisfaction.

Questions to be raised with Watford Community Housing Trust

The Committee and Scrutiny Officer suggested that the Trust be presented with scenarios and asked what processes would be employed in those cases and what further steps would be taken if residents were not satisfied with results. She urged that these questions should not be specific residents' cases.

Councillor Collett noted problems which had occurred in relation to void properties.

The Task Group agreed that it would be wise to understand the procedure regarding void properties: specifically the process of making the property available for the new occupants.

The Committee and Scrutiny Officer suggested that questions on void properties could be linked with queries on repairs.

The Chair said that it would be relevant to know what internal checks and control systems were in place; Councillor Joynes added that it was important that constant reviews were conducted in order to understand which processes worked well and which did not.

The Chair raised the issue of the recently-introduced service charges stating that he had received a considerable quantity of casework on this matter.

Councillor Collett advised that several residents had contacted her as they felt that they were paying twice for the same work to be carried out. She added that there appeared to be several different ideas on what the charges were actually for and suggested that more clarity was required.

The Chair agreed with other members of the Group that the Trust could be more transparent when dealing with these charges.

How the Task Group wishes to gather the views of residents and tenants.

The Chair asked from whom the Task Group would like to obtain evidence and information. He considered that information from the Trust would be imperative and added that it was probable that at least two residents from his ward would be prepared to give evidence.

The Committee and Scrutiny Officer reminded Members that questions should be limited to the scope of the Task Group and should not include any other matters.

The Task Group then discussed how evidence could be gathered.

The Chair referred to page 3 of the evaluation table and said he considered that evidence could be gained from a survey of residents and also through the Trust's annual report.

The Committee and Scrutiny Officer explained that whilst the Council did not have access to residents' addresses, it would be possible to conduct the survey with the assistance of the Trust and residents' associations. She added that surveys could also be achieved through invitation to tenant groups although numbers of invitees should be limited. She suggested that a meeting could be arranged where small groups of residents could meet with Members on an informal basis in order to discuss issues on which they had concerns.

The Task Group considered that this would work well as invitees could include a diversity of local residents and feedback would also be easier to obtain through a focus group. The Chair advised that residents could write comments for posting in a 'suggestions box' if they did not wish to speak to individual councillors at the meeting.

The Committee and Scrutiny Officer suggested that a letter of invitation be drawn up which could be forwarded to tenant groups.

It was noted that it would not be possible for officers to minute the informal meetings with residents.

Suggestions to advertise the survey included an item in the Watford Observer, information in the 'About Watford' magazine and a poster.

It was considered wise to conduct the survey before consultation with Watford Community Housing Trust.

The Chair suggested that other councillors could be invited to the consultation meeting with the Trust.

ACTIONS:

1. To devise a survey for residents asking for their views on:
 - Communication with the Trust
 - Repairs
 - Complaints
 - What the Trust does well and what could be improved

Members to format questions and email to other members of the task group by the following week.

2. Service Charges:
 - To request clarity from the Trust on what the service charges cover.
 - It was agreed that different areas of the borough would require different letters on this issue.
3. Informal meetings:
 - Members to collect information at the informal meetings and then collate responses.
 - A box to be made available for written comments.
 - A meeting room to be booked: possibly the amenity area on the ground floor
 - Two sessions could be held on the same evening: possibly at 6.00 p.m. and 7.00 p.m.
4. Committee and Scrutiny Support Officer to email Councillor Johnson to update on the current meeting.

5. **DATE AND TIME OF NEXT MEETING**

It was AGREED that the next meeting would take place after the forthcoming elections. 13th and 15th May were suggested. Members to email Democratic Services to advise which date would be most convenient.

Group

The meeting started at 6.35 p.m.
and finished at 7.30 p.m.

Chair
Watford Community Housing Trust Task

f 30/04

WATFORD COMMUNITY HOUSING TRUST TASK GROUP

30 July 2013

Present: Councillor Khan (Chair)
Councillors Collett, Johnson and Joynes

Officers: Committee and Scrutiny Support Officer (RW)

6. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies had been received from Councillor Connal.

7. DISCLOSURES OF INTEREST

There were no disclosures of interest.

8. MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING

The minutes of the meeting of 16 April 2013 were submitted and signed.

9. RESIDENTS' SURVEY

The Task Group agreed that the meeting with tenants had been a very useful exercise. The Chair said that the quality and detail of tenants' responses had been excellent and he noted that a pleasing number of residents had attended the session.

The Group noted that tenants had raised the following points:

- Communications – Tenants found the information in newsletters and individual letters difficult to understand with complicated language. Councillor Collett felt that information should be written in more simple, plain English. She noted that some tenants needed support with reading.
- Void properties – It would be valuable to know what happened when a property was left empty. Two of the tenants at the meeting had stated that meters had not been changed nor repairs managed prior to them moving in.
- Quality Control – It appeared that staff did not check that repairs were completed satisfactorily; there were no inspections.
- Cleanliness of the communal areas was an issue for many tenants.
- Contractors did not arrive at the appointed time.
- Tenants would like to fill in a satisfaction slip after work had been completed
- Many tenants felt that there had been no improvement since take-over from the Council's management.

Communication

Councillor Collett noted that tenants had reported that they had had no response when telephoning the trust.

The Chair pointed out that the average reported response time between December 2012 and May 2013 had been 89 seconds. He added that whilst there was a strict set of rules with regard to response times the Council was unable to monitor this.

Members suggested that when one phone had rung for 30 seconds, the call should be diverted to another officer's phone. Members also questioned whether additional staff were employed during busy periods.

Councillor Collett expressed concern that some tenants had difficulty interpreting letters from the Trust. She said that the Trust should be asked whether individual letters were sent to those with special needs and whether the Trust was aware of which tenants might have a disability and consequently need help in this area. She suggested that the Trust be asked how communication was made more simple for tenants.

The Task Group agreed that it would be wise to determine in detail how the Trust communicated with tenants, specifically those with a disability and whether there was indirect discrimination.

The Task Group was also interested in tenants' experiences with staff at the Trust; tenants at the 'drop in' session on 30 May had complained that officers were not always polite during telephone conversations. The group proposed that the Trust should be asked:

- Whether the Trust was aware that some tenants felt intimidated by officers
- Whether the staff were trained in diversity awareness and how to deal with vulnerable tenants
- Whether a record was kept of which tenants had disabilities which made communication difficult

Service Charges

Councillor Collett suggested that clarity with regard to the maintenance charges was required. Tenants of the Trust felt that whilst they had to pay these charges under their tenancy agreement, there was no similar obligation on homeowners to do so.

Councillor Johnson agreed that this arrangement seemed unfair and expressed his concern that the Trust should be fair to all its tenants.

Members discussed the charges and agreed that all bills should ideally be itemised. It was agreed that:

- The bills appeared to be convoluted and unclear and caused tenants undue anxiety
- The bills' lack of clarity resulted in many tenants belief that they had been charged twice for the same service

Councillor Johnson suggested that it would be pertinent to know how much the Trust expected to raise through service charges, how much the initiative cost and whether it was cost effective. He quoted examples of costs including one for cleaning of communal areas at £2592 and questioned whether this was a 'market' rate or whether the residents could clean these areas themselves.

The Chair noted that a number of tenants at the meeting had mentioned Discretionary Payments; he said it would be wise to discover whether these were linked to the service charges, what services the discretionary payments provided and what would be the impact on the WCHT were these charges to be abandoned.

Repairs

Councillor Collett advised that the 2012 / 2013 report had stated that 74.9% of repairs had been completed within the target time frame. The group did not consider that this was satisfactory.

Councillor Joynes said that residents in her ward had advised that contractors had sometimes arrived to effect repairs or maintenance at their property without a prior appointment.

The Chair pointed out that utility companies were able to telephone customers and advise on arrival times; this service should also be provided by the Trust.

In response to a suggestion that the task group should concentrate on individual cases, Councillor Collett advised that the tenants themselves should not be named.

Members thought that the Trust provided an inadequate repairs service. It was considered that management of buildings and homes was taking a 'backseat' to community involvement.

The Task Group felt that the Trust should be asked:

- What were their main priorities
- Whether they considered that sufficient resources were expended on repairs and maintenance.
- How the Trust monitored completion of work, how this was carried out and whether the Trust management team had sight of feedback from tenants
- In what way requests from tenants for repairs were processed

Councillor Johnson said he would be interested in the Trust's priorities for its tenants and whether the Trust considered itself to be different from other residents' associations or housing trusts.

The Chair referred to the compliments offered by tenants at the meeting and pointed out that one tenant considered that the sheltered accommodation was of good quality and that the staff in Clarendon Road were 'good'.

Other members of the Task Group agreed that the newsletters and community booklets were good.

Councillor Johnson noted the Community Enterprise and expressed a wish to be informed by the Trust on how the tenants had benefited through this initiative and what had been achieved.

10. **DATE AND TIME OF NEXT MEETING**

The next meeting would take place on 21 August 2013 at 7.00 p.m. The Chief Executive of the Trust had agreed to attend and a list of areas of concern for the Task Group would be sent to her prior to the meeting.

Chair
Watford Community Housing Trust Task

Group
The meeting started at 2.30 p.m.
and finished at 4.00 p.m.

13/8

WATFORD COMMUNITY HOUSING TRUST TASK GROUP

21 August 2013

Present: Councillor Khan (Chair)
Councillors Collett, Connal, Johnson and Joynes

Also Present: Tina Barnard Chief Executive, Watford Community Housing Trust
Gareth Lewis Director of Property and New Business,
Watford Community Housing Trust
Loreen Herzig Head of Customer Insight,
Watford Community Housing Trust
Councillor Ian Brown, Councillor for Woodside Ward

Officers: Committee and Scrutiny Support Officer (RW)

11. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

No apologies had been received.

12. DISCLOSURES OF INTEREST

There were no disclosures of interest.

13. MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING

The minutes of the meeting of 30 July 2013 were submitted and signed.

14. MEETING WITH THE CHIEF EXECUTIVE OF THE WATFORD COMMUNITY HOUSING TRUST

The Chair asked Tina Barnard to give a brief overview of Watford Community Housing Trust's aims and strategies prior to answering questions from Members.

Tina Barnard advised that the Trust was envisaged as a community business with the aim of 'Better homes friendlier communities . . . *together*'. To this end, £66 million had been invested in improvements during the first six years of the Trust's existence and £9 million on 'better communities'. The Trust's strategy with regard to its community was to involve tenants in scrutiny and also work programmes.

Tina Barnard then expanded on the Better Homes element of the vision, explaining that this encompassed repairs and maintenance; she added that it was hoped to build another 500 new dwellings. She advised that the areas on which Watford Community Housing Trust (WCHT) concentrated were: excellent services, communities, growth and organisation of choice. She then gave

examples of work and initiatives in these areas:

Services: Whilst it was agreed that excellence was not achieved 100% of the time, the Trust was endeavouring to make improvements.

Community Focus: A community event, Watford 2013, was planned for September; community hubs had been initiated in the Harebreaks and at Leavesden Green.

Growth (Bricks and Mortar): 500 new homes were planned, some of which were already on site; these included 21 flats in the High Street which would open in 2014 and 16 new properties in Holywell ward.

Organisation and Choice: WCHT aspired to work co-operatively with their tenants and partners.

The Members then questioned WCHT's representatives.

Aims and Strategies:

Is the Trust different from other residents' associations or housing trusts and if so in what way?

Tina Barnard explained that other large-scale voluntary transfer's (LSVT) governance structures comprised the local authority, tenants and independent members each of whom had a one third block vote on governance issues. At WCHT only tenants and leaseholders could be members. The Board was composed of tenants as the largest group, then independent members and finally two councillors.

What is the difference between a 'commercial business' and the Trust?

Tina Barnard said that whilst the Trust was a 'business' and consequently needed to generate surplus funds it also had significant input into community needs. As examples, Tina Barnard drew attention to the Social Enterprise initiative and schemes to help people back into work.

Councillor Collett commented that there appeared to be great involvement in social reform and community empowerment whilst the main worry for residents was repairs and maintenance of their homes. It was felt that the Trust's focus was too wide and that housing needs were not adequately met.

Tina Barnard reiterated that the aim for the Trust was 'Better Homes Friendlier Communities Together'. She advised that an organisational restructure had been launched on 1 July 2013 to help achieve their Business Plan.

Gareth Lewis added that the programme on repairs and improvements was expanding.

Tina Barnard advised that community/social involvement in the current year would take the form of one big event, Watford 2013, rather than a number of smaller events as in past years.

Which communication areas are in need of improvement?

Tina Barnard replied that any organisation would say that Communication was in most need of improvement. The Trust had acknowledged that their greatest error was the letter regarding service charges; the Trust apologised for this. Feedback and complaints indicated areas that could be improved.

Communication:

Residents find the bills for Service Charges convoluted and unclear and this can be the cause of stress and anxiety for tenants. Could the bills be made clearer and itemised?

Tina Barnard replied that the bills were itemised and passed copies of examples to all attendees at the meeting.

With regard to clarity, Tina Barnard advised that one housing association had, some years previously, attempted to make rent letters easier for their tenants to understand. In a test case, however, a tenant had challenged the legitimacy of a rent increase letter which had not been in a legal format. There was consequently a need to make any communication regarding rent legally binding; this inevitably lead to less clear and understandable language. She stressed that tenants could request help from the neighbourhood teams or from the Citizens Advice Bureau.

Are standard letters sent to all tenants or are individual letters sent to tenants who have special needs or disabilities?

Tina Barnard advised that the Trust had profile information on all tenants and this was updated regularly; tenants' needs were documented. The Customer Service Centre at the Trust and the support workers in the sheltered homes were all well-briefed on the needs of residents. Whilst letters included the required legal terms, the Trust tried to provide as much information as possible and residents were encouraged to talk to Trust staff regarding any problems.

If the phone is not answered within five rings, is the call diverted to other officers?

The Chair noted that the Trust's publication, Gateway, had informed that telephone callers waited an average of 89 seconds before getting through to the relevant officer.

Loreen Herzig explained that in the Customer Services team callers were directed to the first officer available to take the call. If the officer was unable to answer, another member of staff could pick up and deal with the query. It was possible to request a 'call back' and an officer could then ring the caller once they were free.

With regard to the 89 seconds waiting time, a service review was currently looking at how this time could be reduced. The Trust was aiming to answer queries at the first call. Rather than answering quickly and then diverting through selected automated options, it was hoped that calls could be answered by the correct officer and consequently achieve call resolution at the first

attempt.

Tina Barnard added that the priority for phone calls was to resolve a problem at the first call rather than transferring to a number of officers. One of the primary objectives was to ensure that callers used the correct number and were then provided with the relevant information.

Are extra members of staff employed at busy times?

Loreen Herzig replied that a 'call analysis' had been conducted and additional staff were available to answer the phones when the likelihood of a large volume of calls was expected such as when service charges letters had been sent out.

The Chair commented that callers would wish to speak to an officer as soon as possible and not wait too long; he asked whether it would be possible to check how often calls have been abandoned.

Loreen Herzig said that this could be analysed especially since a call-back option had been installed. Monitoring by the Trust could hopefully reduce the number of callers who 'hang up'.

Members referred to the call back option and asked how this system could be accessed. It was noted that many residents found technology a problem to them.

Tina Barnard advised that this information was available in the Gateway News and added that customer feedback on this matter would be useful.

In response to the Chair's query on how the Trust compared with other organisations, Loreen Herzig advised that the Trust had worked with a consultant who had experience of a number of housing providers and could advise on best practice for Watford. The Trust would gain insight from Warner Brothers on how they dealt with customer service aspects at their venues.

How does the Trust compare with other local housing associations such as Thrive?

Loreen Herzig said that it was not possible to gain a comparison between the two housing associations as Thrive had not completed a survey of tenants and residents (STAR) satisfaction survey for benchmarking purposes.

Is the Trust aware that some tenants feel intimidated by some of the officers? How is this monitored?

Loreen Herzig explained that when such a problem occurred, the issue was investigated and feedback recorded. The Trust was not aware of any problems.

Members wished to know whether such issues would be addressed through Human Resources and whether a mediation process would be instigated.

Loreen Herzig advised that where the complainant had experienced a problem, feedback would be provided.

What process should a complainant follow?

Tina Barnard advised that the complainant should call Customer Services on 01923 – 209000 or 01923 – 209247 for queries on repairs. All information was available in the tenants' handbooks and fridge magnets with these numbers had also been provided.

Councillor Ian Brown referred to a recent planning application on land owned by the Trust. He advised that almost all residents had been opposed to the scheme yet the Trust had not taken their views into consideration.

Gareth Lewis responded that there had been consultation with residents and that the original development plans had been altered following feedback. He added that it had been hoped to use a Trust asset to provide accommodation for the community. He advised that the application had had planning officers' recommendation and it was considered that it would be wise to pursue the proposal.

What training do new staff receive and are staff trained in diversity awareness and on how to deal with vulnerable tenants?

Loreen Herzig said that the Trust understood that tenants had complex needs. All staff had full induction training to include elements on equality, diversity and other needs. Additional training was also available and all staff were subject to monitoring.

Following a question from Councillor Collett regarding services for tenants moving to vacated properties, Gareth Lewis advised that a meter reading would be taken when a property became void. The new tenant would then take their own meter reading following instructions in the tenants' handbook.

Councillor Johnson pointed out that the number of the lifeline service had been discontinued but that this had not been updated on the Trust's website.

Service Charges:

How much does the Trust expect to raise through the Service Charges? How much does it cost to implement collection of Service Charges? Is collection cost-effective?

Tina Barnard said that changes had been made to services for leaseholders. Staffing had been reduced by one post. It was anticipated that income to be generated in 2014 would be £606,000, greater than the cost of the deleted post. It should be noted that these charges were for services and not for maintenance of properties.

Review of services charges:

1. Grounds maintenance. This issue had been considered by the Board in July 2013 and it had been acknowledged that it was unfair to charge tenants in houses as the Trust was unable to charge non-tenants for

- grounds maintenance.
2. Affordability. The maximum charge had been capped at £12 per week; this would also be subject to a review.
 3. Accessibility of services. Tenants were not charged for services they did not receive.

Tina Barnard advised that all tenants were given this information.

The figure for expected income has fallen from an anticipated £2.5 million to £606,000. How could this shortfall be explained?

Tina Barnard advised that it was hoped that costs could be reduced. For example, Tina Barnard explained that the Holywell playground improvements would not be recharged.

What would be the impact on the Trust if the Service Charges were discontinued?

Tina Barnard considered that this was a major concern. All housing providers were obliged to reclaim Service Charges in order to cover costs. The current income/ expenditure costs were estimates; if expenditure costs were found to be less than the estimate, charges would be reduced in the following year.

Councillor Collett expressed concern that some residents did not realise what the charges were for.

Tina Barnard responded that the Trust constantly sought to provide clear information.

The Chair pointed out that a number of residents had been charged for services they had not accessed. As an example, some residents had received bills for Legionnaires' Disease testing yet had no water tanks at their homes.

Gareth Lewis responded that more accurate information on properties was now held at the Trust and in future only residents with water tanks would be charged.

Would it be possible to produce a comprehensive map which indicated land and properties owned by the Trust?

Gareth Lewis advised that records had been examined and areas of land measured in order to produce accurate documentation of the Trust's land and property.

Repairs:

In reply to a question from the Chair regarding team leaders in the Repair section, Tina Barnard explained that one manager and two team leaders had recently started in permanent posts with the Trust and one other was due to start shortly.

Does the Trust consider that enough resources are invested in improving properties for their tenants? Figures show that there are 26 operatives in the repair team and a number of management staff; would more operatives create greater satisfaction with repair services?

Gareth Lewis replied that the management team included planners and team leaders who worked to increase productivity and improve systems of working. There had been significant consultation on reorganising systems.

Is the Trust satisfied that work is sufficiently checked once completed? How is this carried out? Is there any quality control, a check-list for the tenants or is the work checked independently?

In reply to this questions and examples of residents' problems, Gareth Lewis explained aspects of the Repair service.

Problems with Gas and Water supplies:

Where services had deteriorated, the contractors had been contacted for discussion regarding the quality of their work. Fewer complaints had been received.

Condensation:

Problems with condensation were frequently due to lifestyle. Problems had been reduced through educating and supporting tenants.

Quality Control:

Post inspections were carried out. Each external contractor should leave a feedback form with a post paid envelope. In addition, the repairs team mailed a feedback form to 50% of residents where jobs have been completed; 50% of those forms had been returned.

When a resident made a complaint, Trust staff would speak with them and try to resolve the problem and prevent any anxiety. The Trust's main priorities were:

1. Getting it right first time
2. Customer Satisfaction
3. To operate efficiently

The Chair noted that the target for achieving the required result first time was 75% and that 74.9% had been achieved. Thrive had achieved 91% from April to June 2012 and 88% from April to September 2012. He asked if there was an explanation for this.

Loreen Herzig replied that the two figures were not, in fact, comparing like-for-like.

Councillor Connal noted that some areas of Watford had greater problems with damp than others. She asked if it were possible to show on a map where such problems occurred.

Social Enterprise:

Does the Trust employ someone with responsibility for Social Enterprise? What has the Trust achieved in the area of Social Enterprise, Social Inclusion, Financial Inclusion, worklessness and Enterprise in the past five years?

Gareth Lewis explained that Social Enterprise initiatives had included the Green Canteen on the Meriden estate and opportunities for training, work and volunteering. The Cycle Hub provided apprenticeship opportunities associated with teaching and mechanical skills. Rides had been organised to promote Health and Wellbeing.

The Community Maintenance Team had been provided with no direct costs to the Trust; this started with five apprentices and had increased to ten.

The Jobs at Home scheme, in partnership with Thrive, created 14 jobs and all operatives had currently been trained to Level 2.

What has been achieved through the Youth Opportunities scheme?

Tina Barnard responded that this initiative targeted tenants' children and addressed anti-social behaviour and the perception of an age divide. The scheme had started slowly; meetings were held every three months.

The Trust's website stated that 70 young people took part initially. How many are still engaged?

Tina Barnard advised that at the most recent meeting, held in early August 2013, 24 or 25 young people had attended.

In reply to a question from Councillor Johnson, Tina Barnard explained that a budget of £8,000 had been set aside. The Dan Tien initiative had been successful and it was hoped to engage with the football club on the Meriden estate.

In response to a further query from Councillor Johnson, Tina Barnard advised that the £8,000 also covered work dealing with vandalism.

The Chair thanked the staff of the Watford Community Housing Trust and said that their answers had assisted with the Task Group's fact finding work.

15. DATE OF NEXT MEETING

The Task Group agreed to meet on Tuesday 3 September 2013.

Chair
Watford Community Housing Trust Task Group

The meeting started at 7.00 p.m.
and finished at 8.50 p.m.

WATFORD COMMUNITY HOUSING TRUST TASK GROUP

3 September 2013

Present: Councillor Khan (Chair)
Councillors Collett, Connal, Johnson and Joynes

Officers: Committee and Scrutiny Support Officer (RW)

16. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

No apologies had been received.

17. DISCLOSURES OF INTEREST

There were no disclosures of interest.

18. MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING

The minutes of the meeting of 21 August 2013 were submitted and signed.

19. RECOMMENDATIONS TO PUT FORWARD TO OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Members discussed the meeting with the Watford Community Housing Trust's representatives and the answers they had received.

Members agreed that involvement with the community appeared to be a major focus of the Trust's work to the detriment of basic housing services. The Task Group noted that tenants had frequently complained that repairs had not been completed and that they had had no feedback slips to record their dissatisfaction.

The Task Group then considered the responses from the Trust's representatives and decided on recommendations regarding areas of concern. These focussed on Communication, Service Charges and Repairs and were based on evidence resulting from interviews with residents and from the survey form on the Repairs Service. The following draft recommendations were proposed:

- All new tenants should be visited by an officer of the Trust to ensure that they are satisfied with their living arrangements
- Residents to be informed that their neighbourhood teams are available to clarify any issues
- The handbook must be made more user-friendly, updated regularly and accessible to all residents
- Improve clarity in presentation of bills sent to residents ensuring that all charges are clearly itemised

- Provide a clear process for residents to query any charges with which they disagree
- Reduce the waiting time for residents to an 'industry acceptable' level. The telephone should be answered within six rings.
- A free phone number should be introduced for residents to call the Trust
- The Trust website must be updated daily to ensure its contact details are current
- The Trust website must reflect the needs of its tenants and its aims and strategies. The website must be easy to navigate and accessible to all residents.
- Staff who communicate with residents must have regular training
- A clear process needs to be put in place where vulnerable residents are recognised and services provided to them to meet their individual needs.
- The process to communicate with vulnerable residents must be clear. Staff should be proactive in dealing with vulnerable residents.
- Improve the relationship between Councillors and the Trust and to work more co-operatively
- Service Charges must be constantly reviewed.
- Service Charges should be itemised for each individual property and items clearly defined.
- The 'first time' satisfaction rate must be increased substantially
- A much more vigorous monitoring of contractors by managers must be undertaken
- Residents to be positively encouraged to return satisfaction surveys
- The Trust must be much more accountable to its residents and stakeholders

It was agreed that these recommendations would be incorporated into the Task Group's final report with supporting conclusions.

AGREED:

- The Committee and Scrutiny Support Officer to email draft recommendation to the Task Group.
- The Task Group to comment on the recommendations to all other Task Group members via email; all comments to be returned to the Committee and Scrutiny Support Officer by 9 September 2013.

Chair
Watford Community Housing Trust Task Group

The meeting started at 6.30 p.m.
and finished at 7.50 p.m.

Watford Community Housing Trust Repairs service - Residents' survey

* Please circle as appropriate

1.	Are you happy with the Trust's housing repairs service? YES* / NO*
2.	When you call the Trust with a housing issue are you satisfied with the way in which your issue is dealt with? YES* / NO*
3.	Would you be willing to complete a satisfaction slip once work to your home is completed? YES* / NO*
4.	Once the service charges are agreed and set do you feel it is important for each tenant to receive an individual letter, setting out details of what they are paying for? YES* / NO*

Please use the box below for any comments you may wish to make

Residents Survey – details of responses to questions

Brief Summary

A total of 30 responses have been received.

Question 1 – 19 out of the 30 responses showed that they were unhappy with the Trust's housing repairs service.

Q2 23 out of the 30 were not satisfied with the way their issues were dealt with by the Housing Trust.

Q3 24 out of the 30 replied that they would be willing to complete a satisfaction slip.

Q4 28 of the responders felt that individual letters should be sent to tenants with details of their service charge.

A full breakdown of each question is shown below.

Question 1 – Are you happy with the Trust's housing repairs service?

Yes	6
No	19
No reply	2
Other responses	Mostly okay – 2 Sometimes – 1
Additional comments to question 1	Yes – when they keep appointments
	Do all own repairs

Question 2 – When you call the Trust with a housing issue are you satisfied with the way in which your issue is dealt with?

Yes	4
No	23
No reply	1
Other responses	Sometimes – 1
Additional comments to question 2	

Question 3 – Would you be willing to complete a satisfaction slip once work to your home is completed?

Yes	24
No	4
No reply	1
Other responses	Not applicable – 1
Additional comments to question 3	

Question 4 – Once the service charges are agreed and set do you feel it is important for each tenant to receive an individual letter, setting out details of what they are paying for?

Yes	28
No	0
No reply	2
Other responses	None
Additional comments to question 4	

Residents Survey – details of responses to questions

Additional Comments

Complaints:

All complaints fall on deaf ears
One member of staff was 'very rude'
Repairs team are rude and one member of staff was 'extremely rude'
Problems with damp and asbestos, 'very poor quality'
Varied degree of satisfaction
Tenants no longer 'at the heart of the Trust'
There should be a scrutiny committee
2-bed flat modified for disability and then asked to pay bedroom tax
Tenants are frightened of complaining
Response time is poor and main switchboard worse now than previously
No inspectors to look at work
Complaints procedure is not working
Residents are scared and would like a permanent manager
Need a permanent manager in order to feel safe

Compliments:

Sheltered accommodation is good quality
People in Clarendon Road (Trust offices?) are good

Services charges:

Tenants paying for a facility which everyone uses
This is 'grey' area – original letter did not sufficiently explain what charges are for
The Trust listens to tenants i.e. service charges to be phased in over 3 years
Charges not itemised
Asked why home owners do not have to pay service charges
Disabled people are discriminated against
Payments on statements do not reflect payments made
Would like payments to be itemised
Takes a minimum of 3 to 5 days before accounts are credited
Should be itemised
Increase in charges from £450 to £660 in one year
Tenants are charged for services which they do not need
Charges need to be sorted out
There should be individual letters explaining the breakdown of charges

Discretionary payments:

No-one knows what is happening
People are 'upset' at paying Ground Maintenance charges

Communication with tenants:

Trust uses a variety of communication methods to keep tenants aware of issues Managers seem to be 'out of their depth' and do not want to listen

'No clarity' from Trust

Lack of information on: Board membership and home improvement matters

Wants relevant info rather than 'crosswords and recipes' – in newsletter presumably?

'Never' consulted on improvements

Lack of communication

'Not specific enough. It can be very complicated . . . not easy to understand'

Difficult to make the Trust understand the urgency of repairs

Trust does not ring back after message left

Letters are too complicated

No response received

No updates received

No confirmation phone calls or emails received

Residents feels the Trust are not always polite on the phone

Repair services:

Repairs staff take the whole call and make appointment at this point or will call back

Repair to sink unsatisfactory

Waited 7 days for electric heater

Had new doors and windows – all fine

All repairs done competently and within acceptable time frame

Believes tenants should pay for services received

Trust does not complete jobs

Rang for 45 minutes before call was answered

Staff did not seem qualified

Flooring inadequate

Faulty property and issues not resolved prior to tenancy starting

Service very poor

Complaints not resolved

Not happy with response – failed appointments

Does all their own repairs so that 'décor does not get ruined'

Mostly ok

Kitchen renewal – 5 visits

Radiator in communal area has never worked despite being reported

3 weeks to repair bin storage / tap repaired within 24 hours

Satisfaction with repairs depends on staff dealing with issues: 35% good / 65% poor

Satisfied with repairs when appointments are kept

Satisfaction slip should be filled in when work completed

Not happy with support workers – they are not helpful enough

Happier with colour choices and type of repair

Accommodating in getting a disabled shower refitted

Contractors did not give good service and were unhelpful regarding colour schemes

Kitchen refit resulted in less space in kitchen

Another company did good job decorating and repairing ceiling

Repairs take too long

Previous contractors very good and clean, current contractors 'rubbish'

Repair work on-going for some time but has not resulted in any improvement

When a response is received the work is 'sometimes' good

Work on windows and doors not done properly

Cabinet

18 February 2013

Present: Mayor Dorothy Thornhill (Chair & Housing Portfolio Holder)
 Cllr D Scudder (Vice Chair & Environmental Services
 Portfolio Holder)
 Cllr Crout (Leisure & Community Services Portfolio Holder)
 Cllr Sharpe (Planning & Legal & Property Portfolio Holder)
 Cllr Watkin (Finance & Shared Services Portfolio Holder)

Also present:
 Councillors Bell and Meerabux.

71 INDEPENDENT AUDIT OF WATFORD COMMUNITY HOUSING TRUSTS DELIVERY OF THE STOCK TRANSFER PROMISES TO TENANTS

As part of the transfer of the Council's housing stock, a promise had been made to tenants about improvements to their homes and safeguards for their future security. The promise contained a number of individual statements with the overriding statement that everything within the promises document, "Same people, more resources, better service", would be delivered within five years i.e. 9 September 2012.

At the request of the Council, Watford Community Housing Trust (WCHT) commissioned an independent audit of its delivery of the promises. Cabinet received a report providing details of the promises and the success in delivering them.

The Mayor commented that an independent audit had been absolutely the right thing to do and the result was a good robust report which she invited the Executive Director, Services, to introduce.

The Executive Director stressed that the report focussed solely on the promises and that this had been necessary to enable the Council to provide formal notification on the delivery of those promises to the HCA.

The main thrust of the promises was to deliver the decent homes standard and this had been met. She commented that, whilst there had been a few communications issues, working relationships between the Trust and the Council had been good. The Trust had now produced its next business plan "Everyone Matters" and copies of their Community Development Strategy were available at the meeting.

She went on to draw Members' attention to areas where the Trust had developed in areas beyond what was promised. These achievements were outlined in paragraph 3.7 of the report.

Councillor Bell said he was pleased with what the Trust had achieved but added that this had also been expedited through councillors' casework. He added that he had some doubts about the success of tenant participation and that there was a need to keep this in mind. He also hoped that communication between the Trust and councillors could be maintained and continue to improve.

The Mayor concurred with the councillor's view about consultation, referring specifically to an occasion when councillors were refused attendance at a meeting. It was important to keep stressing the need for councillors to be involved. In response to the councillor's point about tenant participation, she accepted that this could be quite challenging.

She added that the Council could never have achieved the standard achieved by the Trust and also the added value obtained in areas where it had gone above and beyond what was expected.

Councillor Scudder welcomed the taking over of community centres at Leavesden Green and the Harebreaks and turning them into Community Hubs which would re-vitalise the areas and bring money in.

Councillor Sharpe endorsed the Mayor's comments regarding the achievements by the Trust especially the amount of work done to meet the decent homes standard which, he said, could never have been met by the Council. It had resulted in better facilities for the worse off and more vulnerable residents of Watford. He concluded by stating that the decisions to give tenants the choice had been clearly vindicated as had the choice made by the tenants themselves to go for the Gateway option.

Councillor Watkin endorsed this view and commented that the Trust had been successful in creating an holistic approach to looking after Watford's housing tenants.

The Mayor thanked the Trust and said she hoped that the Trust and the Council would continue to work co-operatively in the future.

RESOLVED

that Cabinet notes the report and instructs officers to provide official notification of completion which can be forwarded to the HCA.