

WATFORD COMMUNITY HOUSING TASK GROUP

31 January 2019

Present: Councillor A Khan (Chair)
Councillors S Cavinder, A Dychton, A Grimston and K Hastrick

Also present: Tina Barnard, Watford Community Housing Chief Executive
(minute numbers 12 to 15)
Ben Johnson, Watford Community Housing Group Director of
Operations (minute numbers 12 to 15)
Councillor Bell (minute number 15)

Officers: Committee and Scrutiny Support Officer (AG)

12 Apologies for absence

There were no apologies for absence.

13 Disclosure of interests

There were no disclosures of interest.

14 Notes from previous meeting

The notes from the meeting held on 17 October 2018 were submitted and signed.

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

15 Inquiries of Watford Community Housing

The Chair thanked Ms Barnard and Mr Johnson for attending the meeting. He explained that members would ask questions in four topic areas in respect of service charges, maintenance, repairs and customer service - with a member leading on each item.

In response to the questions, Ms Barnard and Mr Johnson:

Service charges

- Advised that there had been a significant move forward in how service charges were managed since the previous task group had been held in 2013. Watford Community Housing (WCH) had taken on board all of the comments made previously.
- Informed the task group that two letters were sent out annually to tenants advising on the service charges (these were provided by Mr Johnson to members). The first, sent in February, was an estimate of charges for the following year based on experience from the previous year. The second, sent in September, included details of the actual charges made for the previous year – with adjustments made in relation to any service paid for that was not provided; and with an appropriate credit provided.
- Clarified that charges were not made when it was known that something was not working. It was not common practice to charge for services that WCH knew would not be provided over the year. Where this did occur, it would be a mistake and WCH would apologise for this. Overall, WCH would prefer a fixed service charge approach but the present system was based on actual costs.
- Advised that service charges were not applicable to houses unless they had a service provided. Tenants were responsible for maintenance of their own grounds. Charges were not made for maintenance beyond a property's curtilage – although this would apply in the case of leaseholders.
- Explained that it was difficult to pin point on how many occasions and in what type of circumstances tenants were paying for a service, shown in their service charge, that was not actually provided. However, most credits related to issues around the cleaning contract and there was work to do in this regard. There had been ten such credits during the present financial year.
- Advised that cleaning services were provided to a block at a fixed price. If a clean was missed, this may be identified by estate and neighbourhood officer checks or by residents reporting that they had not seen a cleaner. WCH would then have a conversation with the contractor and a credit note would be issued.
- Explained that WCH was in the middle of re-procuring the cleaning contract and there were questions around the services currently being provided. The procuring process involved site visits with residents and interviews with the potential providers. WCH had established that the specification needed more deep cleans and had examined the quality of the cleaning (including carrying out surveys on different estates). Trends had been identified and the cleaning was not as good as it should have

been. It was hoped that improvements would be made under the new contract.

- Advised that selecting the new contractor would be carried out looking at price and quality through the Official Journal of the European Union (OJEU) mechanism. Existing cleaner's role could be protected through the TUPE regulations and the new contract would set the benchmark. A range of communication was being provided to staff around the new practices; including newsletters. Cleaners would be paid at the level of the real living wage.
- Explained that there would be liquidated ascertained damages in the contract; so if a service was not provided the contractor would be required to provide a credit, and this would be given back to tenants. WCH did not make any profit from service charges – in fact they were capped so there was the potential to make a loss.
- Clarified that it was not only residents who may identify that a service was not provided – but site inspection teams would pick these up. Best practice in determining service charges was to start with a forecast, based on experience, and then calculate the actual costs. If WCH under estimated, tenants would have to pay the difference in the following year. WCH would like to get the estimates 100% right but this was not always possible. Since 2013, the estimating process had improved; but a forecast could not be completely correct. The only other course would be to have a fixed service charge, but this could result in charging too much. The WCH system sought to ensure that this did not occur.
- Explained how a tenant could report a service not being provided to WCH and how a credit note would be provided by the contractor – with a reduction in the actual payments made by the tenant the following year. Furthermore, in exceptional cases, a tenant's account could be credited more quickly.
- Agreed that WCH could look at how information was provided to tenants outlining how to report instances when a service was not provided.
- Clarified that the present cleaning contract was coming to an end and that service charges were open to both external and internal audit.

Maintenance

- Advised that the periodic maintenance of such items as fire alarms and lifts was prescribed by statute. Maintenance of drains was on a responsive basis and letters were sent to residents advising on how to prevent blockages. Letters had also been sent to tenants advising on how to best use lifts – and this had resulted in significantly fewer problems. It had taken some time to forward the letter as WBC had arranged for an independent study in to the issue to be undertaken; there had been some concern around materials for example. The letter

had been carefully drafted to avoid offending residents in any way whilst delivering the key messages. Messages around fire safety would also be really important going forward having regard to the Grenfell Fire tragedy.

- Advised that the type of communication informing residents of maintenance depended on the nature of the works being conducted. For example, a letter was sent to tenants regarding sprinkler maintenance but not in relation to matters that did not affect their lives – such as working out of the way in lofts. There would seem to be little value in notifying in these circumstances. However, it would be worthwhile in notifying should a deep cleaning process be undertaken for example. It was emphasised that residents were interested in matters that affected them; not just routine maintenance. Nevertheless, WCH may be able to do something more.
- Informed the task group that guttering was cleared on a five-year cycle taking place concurrently with redecoration works. An annual forward guidance package had been introduced to leaseholders.
- Explained that where a need for repairs was identified during maintenance, these had taken 10.4 days on average to complete in urgent cases during the current financial year. None urgent repairs took on average 30 days to complete. Gutter repairs were not considered an urgent issue. There was a need to balance need and resource availability with regard to categorising as an emergency. If a gutter was overflowing, the likely damage to the building within the 30 days was not likely to be significant. Whilst WCH had finite resources, it took in to account additional complications around an issue (such as water from gutters freezing in cold weather on pavements) in determining whether a case was urgent.
- Advised that residents received a letter outlining the timescale and cost when repair/refurbishment works were being undertaken.
- Explained that 10% of cyclical maintenance work was inspected; although it was not possible to give the precise number. However, all major works and replacements were inspected. Also, if problematical trends were identified, the 10% inspection figure would be increased. This had occurred in relation to a particular operator – where 100% of their works were inspected.
- Advised that £66m had been spent when WCH took over their properties. There was a scheme to look at ageing properties including a programme of demolition and the building of new homes. Properties were a key asset of WBC and they were looked after. WCH had a 30-year plan, including a 20% stock condition survey, and as a result it knew the condition of its properties very well.

- Agreed that it would be desirable for councils and WCH to work more closely together to coordinate grass cutting on land owned by the different agencies. At present, this was a challenge as there were different specifications and quality cycles. One organisation may cut 12 times a year and another only seven so it was difficult to coordinate cutting times. WCH had a performance specification – so grass length was kept to a certain level. A solution may be that cutting was transferred to WCH who would then charge councils for cutting the grass in their ownership. Alternatively, Councils would cut WCH grass near to parks and charge accordingly. It was agreed that another option may be to employ one contractor to cut all grass owned by the different agencies following a procurement process. WBC and members further agreed that work should be undertaken to try and resolve the issue to avoid resident's frustration that grass was cut to different heights and at varying times.
- Advised that during the current financial year, WCH had commissioned a survey of their trees to determine a five-year maintenance programme. This would be contained in the procurement contract.
- Explained that there were two types of property exchanges; mutual swaps and internal transfers. There had been 26 mutual swaps in the current financial year and 350 internal transfers. Mutual swaps took 42 day to complete and this was a statutory process. The time taken to complete internal transfers would vary; dependent on need and stock availability.
- Advised that a tenancy was removed from a person swapping and the condition of the property was noted. WCH conducted electricity and gas checks before any exchange and also looked for any health and safety issues. WCH could request tenants to carry out works that may be required.
- Informed the task group that properties for new tenants were brought up to lettable standards. A team leader would specify the works required and the relevant trades would carry these out. The works were then inspected and the property went on to the choice based letting system. There was a five-day period to conduct minor repairs in respect of voids; but major repair works, such as new kitchens or rewiring, took longer.
- Agreed that there had been some occasions when properties had not been ready before tenants had moved in. However, WCH now had better communication with residents to keep them informed of developments. In relation to the standard of works, there were questions around when it was best to carry out repairs. In some instances, it was more appropriate that these were conducted when residents were in situation so they had choices as to the nature of the

repairs. However, the works needed to be conducted in a timely manner and tenants needed to be kept involved.

- Advised that mutual exchanges were not in the control of WCH – this was a tenant's choice. The organisation followed the statutory process.
- Agreed that taking a long time to get a property to a safe standard in an emergency situation should not be happening. In these circumstances WCH may have let customers down.

Repairs

- Explained that it could be a challenge in ensuring that the correct trades person attended on the first repair visit. However, customers uploading videos of the problem or using 'FaceTime' messaging could help ensure that the right trade was deployed. First time fix was monitored as part of a customer survey – with 80% of cases being resolved on the first visit. There was a need to get the diagnostics right to ensure the correct trades person was sent. A 100% success rate was not possible; and it would not be cost effective to conduct pre-inspections (that could also result in delays). Furthermore, WCH employed multi-skilled operatives - and a skills matrix was recently prepared enabling other operatives to be provided with further skills (this was a rolling process). The task group was reassured that WCH had sufficient staff to carry out repair works.
- Advised that emergency repairs (those that were health and safety related) were carried out within 24-hours. All other repairs were carried out as soon as possible and in no longer than 30 days. These were triaged and prioritised. A record was kept of vulnerable tenants (such as the elderly and disabled) using a process of user defined characteristics. In high rise buildings, information about tenants was kept in a fire proof box that was available to the Fire and Rescue Service. WCH was proactive in regard to safety issues – such as in relation to the installation of sprinklers.
- Confirmed that the majority of repairs were conducted by in-house teams. However, specialists were employed in relation to such issues as drains, entry systems and windows and doors.
- Advised that 10% of repairs were inspected; this equated to approximately 140 inspections a month (it would not be possible to increase this number). There was a five-year schedule of rates and quality was checked against price.

Customer service

- Explained that when there was a changeover of staff conducting casework, the person handing over would leave notes for the incumbent member of staff. It would be advisable to make better use of IT systems to record activity. This would create a much leaner system and have customer interventions retained in one place; WCH was looking to

improve in this area. WCH operated a housing management system call 'Orchard' and further implementation would take place in the next financial year. There was a need to ensure that staff understood the importance of record keeping and that they input data. WCH also had a road map of the critical issues. There was a need, however, to be realistic about expectations.

- Advised that they were not aware of a handover causing a delay in continuing with casework – albeit anti-social behaviour cases could take a long time to resolve.
- Reiterated that central record keeping was something WCH was developing. Providing support to tenants was about partnership working and the WCH role was to signpost to appropriate services. WCH had a good relationship with the police and had an awareness of vulnerable tenants through tenancy audits.
- Explained that they were not aware of instances when staff were uncivil to residents when reporting the need for repairs. WCH carried out a post call survey and would investigate any examples of impoliteness reported to them. There had never been an official complaint in relation to conduct at the call centre. If there was an 'out of hour' issue this would also be investigated.
- Advised that the WCH website contained information explaining the responsibilities the organisation had for particular repairs and the responsibilities of tenants (such is in relation to post and rail fencing issues).

The Chair thanked Ms Barnard and Mr Johnson for their contribution to the scrutiny process and explained that a report on the findings of the task group would be discussed at various council forums. WCH would be forwarded a copy of the report and have the opportunity to comment on the conclusions and recommendations contained therein.

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Final actions

Members discussed conclusions and recommendations and the final actions to be conducted to conclude the task group.

Chair
Watford Community Housing Task Group

The meeting started at 6.30 p.m.
and concluded at 8.55 p.m.