

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 She advised that much of the information was now out of date; the Housing Trust intended to update this information to provide performance statistics and benchmarking.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.

Chair
Watford Community Housing Trust Task Group

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