

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.