

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 led 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.