

Heads of Service Q & A session – 03rd September 2018

The panel:

Amy Willcox-Smith – Head of Customer Relationships

Stuart Thompson – Head of Maintenance Services

Paul Marsh – Head of Asset and Compliance

Ben Johnson – Facilitator and Director of Operations.

This evening was an open forum where tenants asked general questions about the services that the Group provides. WCH provides a high level of service and has good levels of customer satisfaction from its tenants. It is acknowledged that there will always be some level of service failure which the organisation will learn from. The following questions were asked of the panel:

Q. Could each of the panel please explain their role and what it covers?

Paul- Ensuring that our properties are warm, safe and weathertight.

Amy- Most of the customer facing roles fall under my remit. This includes tenancy management, estates services, community engagement, customer services, independent and temporary accommodation, financial inclusion, tenancy support and the anti-social behaviour team.

Stuart- My role covers responsive repairs, voids (empty properties) repairs and gas servicing contracts. Managing the Gateway Repairs Team operatives that you see out in our vans is part of my role.

Q. Why do people that look after their gardens and property go to the bottom of the list of works?

Planned works are not affected by the tenant and how they keep their property. A stock condition survey is the only way that these are coordinated.

Stuart added that if someone reports a repair issue, we are duty bound to act on it. Amy added that we have processes through Neighbourhood services, for example a recharging process, and we use these to recover costs when tenants have caused intentional damage to a property. We are working together to ensure that we have tighter checks in place for when a tenant leaves a property.

Q. I'm very concerned about the overhanging tree in my back garden. It is very large and I feel it poses a health and safety risk. When I reported it, the company that came to examine the tree behaved so inappropriately that they were not given access.

Trees that are located inside the garden of a property are the responsibility of the tenants as per the tenancy agreement. As this example is on shared land, Amy agreed to investigate the exact details of this specific issue and come back to the questioner.

Q. There is an issue with contractors going out to properties and leaving areas in a poor condition. What are you doing to stop this?

Paul explained that feedback is critically important in stopping this from happening. There are regular meetings held with contractors that tenant representatives attend. We need to know about the dissatisfaction for us to be able to challenge the contractors at these meetings. The more complaints we see, the easier it will be to identify if it is a particular staff member that is consistently

failing to meet the right standards and direct action can be taken. Paul urged tenants to complete feedback and explained that feedback can be given online at www.wcht.org.uk/give-us-feedback.

The audience added a positive example of contractors in their home and a GMT representative further highlighted the importance of ensuring bad service is reported.

Q. Some years ago the council installed some gates at my property. They recently needed repairing but Watford Community Housing said that they no longer do gates. Surely the original commitment should be honoured? I managed to fix it myself, but what happens for those people who are not able to do these sorts of works themselves?

Stuart explained that, for our general needs properties, we do not repair gates or fences. We do have some instances where we would consider making the repair, for example if the tenant is vulnerable, we would consider the repair. If a fence line borders a communal area we would also consider the repair.

Q. I moved in 18 years ago and my rent has risen by £60 per week since then. Once I stop working, I'm concerned about being able to afford my rent taking into consideration other outgoings.

The panel explained that for the last three years rents have been reduced. The rents come from a government-set formula and social rents are typically 40% of the value of market rent properties. This means that social tenancies are priced between 40-60% less than an equivalent property on the private rental market. It was explained that Watford Community Housing have two Tenancy Support Officers who would be able to visit you in your home and support tenants who may be worried about making ends meet.

Q. Last year, everyone's boiler messed up at the same time. Are we better prepared this year?

Paul explained that it was an exceptional year and the extreme temperatures created a huge problem across the country. The wind chill factor froze the condense pipes and this was not an ordinary set of circumstances. Services countrywide were affected and organisations like British Gas stopped visiting properties and even stopped answering calls. Our operatives repeatedly worked late to ensure that disruption to tenants was minimised and, given the circumstances, provided exceptional service. We have learnt a number of lessons from this and we will increase information on our website and social media for this winter. We have also tightened up some of our emergency staff procedures.

Q. The heating in my scheme has been down for a month. What is happening?

Paul explained that the boiler is currently being replaced at Woodfields due to age and condition.. The boiler is going to be replaced by October 2018. Paul explained that heating is usually off for the entire summer so this should not cause any disruption or inconvenience to tenants.

Q. Are you planning to employ extra staff to deal with the backlog of repairs?

We are currently not experiencing a backlog of repairs. We currently have one vacancy within the repairs team. We do have some trades, particularly roofing, plastering and groundworks where works are taking longer to complete. We still have an average completion time of around 11 working days for all repairs, which is a good performance.

Stuart explained that when the gas contract was taken in-house we did not lose any of our staffing from the regular repairs team. Any staff moving across to gas were recruited and backfilled.

Q. Rent decrease is due to come to an end in 2020. Do we know what it will increase to?

The panel believed the current proposal to be CPI+1% for 5 years after 2020. Ben explained that the Board would need to decide on the exact amount, however, it cannot be more than the level set by government.

Q. Paul, please can you confirm what is sent out in letters asking tenants to be available for appointments?

Paul explained that a letter seems to have been sent that includes an error. The team are investigating this. The usual letters explain to tenants that they are on the list, and should contact Watford Community Housing to make an appointment. Paul emphasised that if the letters do not say 'please call us to arrange your preferred appointment' he will ensure the letters are re-sent.

Q. It took 11 weeks to replace three washing lines. How can I find out when the repair will be taking place if I want to be there?

Some communal repairs are postponed when urgent works are received. This work has taken longer than we hoped, for which we apologise.

Amy explained that by signing up to the digital tenancy services residents will be able to track the progress of communal repairs in the future.

Q. I reported a chain-link fence as broken that was repaired with plastic cable ties. When will it be repaired fully?

Stuart is aware of the repair and accepted that this was a temporary repair to this chain-link fence. The team have planned work for the permanent repair and will share this information when available.

Q. There is a lot of fly-tipping taking place on the Holywell. Who is in charge of clearing this?

Amy explained that our estates are made up of different patchworks of land. Some belong to schools, Councils, Highways and Watford Community Housing. Sometimes the boundaries between land owned by different agencies can be extremely small and we appreciate that this is frustrating for tenants wanting to report the problem. Generally, fly-tipping seems to happen in a pattern, which can be investigated by the Environmental Crime Officer. The audience spoke highly of the previous estates officer, Gareth, who sadly passed away. It was agreed that Dan Apps, the new Holywell caretaker, would meet some of the key residents.

Q. Do you still have estate inspections?

Yes we do. The dates of these are added to the website and you can request to be added to a mailing list. Amy explained that we have created a document that outlines the expected standards in cleaning and grounds maintenance. We have tenants volunteering as residents inspectors, but this does not replace the estate walkabouts with Neighbourhood Officers.

An audience member explained how fantastic their recent experience of an estate walkabout was.

Q. Who has the keys to the sheds at Longcroft?

Stuart agreed to query this with the team at Longcroft and will provide feedback.

Q. When and how are electrical checks completed?

Paul explained that we are required to perform a check at change of tenancy. We operate to industry best practice, which says a check should be completed once every five years and this is what we do. If the check flags up issues that are severe it must be repaired there and then, otherwise the repair will be scheduled. The test takes an average of 30 minutes and any remedial works will take a little longer. It is vitally important to let staff into your property to complete these tests.

Q. How do Watford Community Housing staff notify the customer services team that someone is responsible for a particular series of works, or that a particular contractor no longer works for us?

We will send them a template letter containing the up-to-date information so that they are fully briefed when speaking to tenants on the phone. We also meet with customer services staff at their weekly team meetings when new contractors are starting on site. We will investigate the individual concern raised.

Q. Does the planned works programme include a downstairs bathroom?

The second toilet would be repaired but not replaced under the current improvement programme. If the tenant was disabled we would apply a different approach. The rent reduction has had an impact on what services can be provided.

Q. I've got a wet room that I have been told needs the flooring replaced. However, no follow-up action has been taken. What can you do to help?

Paul explained that he would follow up by organising a stock condition survey of the property. Paul explained that this is how we can keep on top of issues and ensure that our properties remain in a good condition for future tenants for years to come.

Q. Is it possible to group the same type of repairs to properties just two doors apart? We were given dates almost a month apart and were told that they cannot be grouped.

Stuart explained that there is an issue with moss growing on roofs of the bungalows in this particular area of the Meriden. The moss dries up and then is washed into the gutter with rainfall, which in turn blocks the gutter. Stuart explained that they are going to split the roofing team into two teams so that we can get the repair time down to 6-8 weeks. The specific moss problem at these properties means that this issue will reoccur. The planning team do try to group jobs together, but this is not always possible.

Stuart will review the two appointments.

Q. Why are we leaving bungalows empty? The condition of the property deteriorates and it could be used by a homeless family.

Amy explained that she would follow up with the development team as this relates to the Meriden redevelopment. There are challenges with letting this property because they are due to be demolished in the estate regeneration. Letting it as temporary accommodation would mean that whoever was given the property would need to be rehoused in the near future.

Q. I've complained about guttering for over a year. We were told we would need a cherry picker and that would need to come under planned maintenance. Sometimes it seems that staff on the phones are reluctant to give appointment dates. Why is this?

Stuart explained that the wrong information has been given and was concerned about the source of the information. Between 78-80% of appointments are given at first contact. Stuart will review the actual repair being queried and feed back to the tenant.

Amy added that we now have post-call surveys in place, which means that you can give feedback on the quality of the call.

Q. How are the lifts progressing at Abbey and Munden View on the Meriden?

Paul explained that we have engaged with an independent firm to review the lifts over the next month. At the end of the month there will be a report which will explain more about the cause of the issues. We've invested in the lifts and they are not performing well; this is a real concern for the organisation. Paul explained that the service is not meeting the right standard and the team are investigating with our professional advisors. Ben Johnson confirmed the organisations' commitment to reviewing the service charge to take into account the lift disruptions over this last year.

Paul will be at the Meriden Residents Association Open Meeting on Friday 14th September, at the Meriden Community Centre on Garsmouth Way, starting at 7:30pm. Meriden residents are encouraged to attend.

Q. Are Woodfields getting a new lift?

Paul confirmed that this is scheduled for the 2019-2020 programme.

Q. What is the cost of the fire brigade coming out to support people who are stuck in a lift?

The cost is £700 and we have paid it on one occasion.

Q. What about CCTV on the Meriden?

CCTV is being reviewed across the sites where we currently have CCTV, not just the Meriden. The CCTV Advisory Service have been reviewing our CCTV needs and ensuring that everything is suitable for the exact location. We will be tendering for the contract shortly, hopefully to be completed by New Year.

Q. Would I be allowed to put in my own CCTV?

Paul explained you must do a privacy impact assessment (PIA) before you install any CCTV. If anyone ever challenges you under GDPR or data protection, you can then show the courts that you have been a reasonable user of CCTV. Once CCTV is set up it can lead to a number of complaints, concerns and cases of harassment. Amy suggested an FAQ document be created.

Q. What are the policies regarding outside toilets and why are they sometimes capped and sometimes removed?

Stuart confirmed that, when moving into a property, the outside toilet should be capped and this should be explained to the tenant at the viewing. There is an option to allow the tenant to keep the outside toilet on the condition that they maintain it themselves. The reason for this is that they generate repairs. We would cap supplies to outside toilets whilst they are occupied. Stuart advised that a tenant would be able to pay for someone to remove it themselves and this is relatively inexpensive.

Q. Is there any update on the replacement of door entry systems on flats?

Paul explained that a contractor has been selected and that letters will soon be going out to confirm. Some of the door entry systems are beyond economic repair so they need to be replaced with key fob access and new doors for those blocks that require it. We anticipate that we will be spending around £1million on this programme over the next five years. Bids were displayed in the reception

area and leaseholders and shared owners were made aware that they could come to see them. Legislation stipulates that we consult with leaseholders and shared owners. 'Entrotec' is the system that has been utilised; this is currently used at Abbey and Munden View on the Meriden. This means that we can remotely disable fobs if they are lost.

Q. Do we charge to replace fobs?

If a resident loses a fob we charge £16 for a replacement. Two fobs are given per household as standard. If you have already paid for an extra fob, we will replace those extra fobs free of charge, where we are upgrading the system.

Q. Can we find out more about what is happening with the door entry systems?

Paul explained that it isn't the easiest information to relate to tenants. Amy added that we can consult with tenants and take their views into account and then build them in to the spec of the brief that goes to tender where this is feasible.

Q. Do we think Watford Community Housing is prioritising development over maintenance of existing stock?

Paul explained that building new properties does not interfere with the budget for planned works.. Ben added that our stock is decreasing year on year due to 'Right To Buy' and there is a UK-wide housing crisis. Our Board strongly feels that we need to be playing our part in creating new properties. The room were pleased to see the new Housing Green Paper showing a positive approach to building more social housing.

Homes England provides funding for building work. They have just begun to offer a pot of funding to enable social housing programmes to be delivered and we are currently bidding for this.

Q. What opportunity will there be for tenants to talk about the Green Paper?

Amy will be looking to work with tenants to formally respond to the recent Government Green Paper. Working with the Gateway Membership Team and also posting on the Gateway voices Facebook page.

Q. How would we apply for funding for a community projects?

We have three pots of funding available for tenant and community projects:

The Community Chest- For projects requesting less than £500.

<https://www.wcht.org.uk/community-chest>

The Community Development Fund- For projects bidding for more than £500. This is utilised by experienced partner organisations to deliver larger scale projects for far reaching benefit to our communities.

<https://www.wcht.org.uk/community-development-fund>

The third pot of funding is for our Tenant/Residents' Associations.

Bids received are reviewed by tenants and go to a panel.

Q. An audio screen has been installed in the Meriden high rise block, when is it going to work?

It is a Onelan screen (which is a pilot), which means we can change the information displayed on the screen from the office. Staff training will be taking place next Tuesday and from then onwards you will begin to see messages regarding any service interruption. The benefit of this screen is that messages can be posted remotely, even out of hours.

Q. The street light outside my property always used to remain on all night. Now it is off and I have to carry a torch. I know this isn't the responsibility of Watford Community Housing but what can you advise?

Street lighting does come under Hertfordshire County Council responsibility. Amy explained that once the policy was applied, various TRA groups complained and put pressure on. The findings from the Council were that crime and ASB reduces when the lights are switched off. Amy emphasised the need to put pressure on your County Council representatives for this issue.

Q. If a tenant locks themselves out of their property, why do we charge them to fix it?

This charge helps to cover the cost of the operative. We do not make a profit on that, all costs go back into the repairs services. We use that charge to pay the cost of the operative, pay the van costs, and any administration costs. We charge £25 for this service and this is very competitive compared to the private market.

Ben Johnson closed the meeting by thanking all involved for their participation.