

Report to: Performance Scrutiny Committee

Date of Meeting: 21st March 2019

Lead Member/Officer: Lead Member for Housing, Regeneration and the Environment/
Lead Officer Community Housing

Report Authors: Lead Officer Community Housing/
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Title: Wales Audit Office Service User Perspective Review

1. What is the report about?

This report is in response to the findings of the Wales Audit Office (WAO) Service User Perspective Review of August 2018.

2. What is the reason for making this report?

To outline how the service is addressing the two proposals for improvement outlined in the WAO Service User Perspective Review – the Welsh Quality Housing Standard (Sept. 2018) in relation to working with tenants:

To help those experiencing damp and homes that are not adequately heated, fuel efficient, or well insulated; and

To review the long-term impact of the ending of the resident warden service from its sheltered housing schemes

3. What are the Recommendations?

That the Committee considers the contents of this report and comments accordingly.

4. Report details

The WAO audit report includes feedback from doorstep interviews with 122 of our tenants out of our total stock of 3,385 homes. The recommendations in the report result from feedback given to the WAO during these doorstep interviews.

The two proposals for improvement were:

4.1 To help those experiencing damp and homes that are not adequately heated, fuel efficient, or well insulated

Section 22 of the WAO report makes reference to feedback from tenants that 23% feel that they have “damp and condensation” issues. These cases were not inspected or investigated any further and this is acknowledged in the report.

There is a distinction between the main causes of damp and condensation. Damp is generally caused by moisture penetration into a building and can be remedied by undertaking repairs or damp proofing to prevent moisture entering the building structure. Condensation, whilst this can be linked to heating and insulation, can also be due to conditions inside the home and requires the occupier to manage heating and ventilation within their home.

For context, a survey of 2,000 occupiers across all housing tenures undertaken by Ipsos MORI for the Energy Saving Trust in 2014 reported that 37% of occupiers had experienced condensation.

Although neighbouring authorities Wrexham (4%) and Flintshire (7%) reported much lower issues with condensation compared to our 27%, the total number of people interviewed was significantly smaller in proportion to Denbighshire - 84 tenants out of 11,207 in Wrexham and 96 out of 7,167 in Flintshire. Ynys Môn however reported 37% who experienced damp and condensation and this was with a similar sample size to Denbighshire (119 out of 3,792)

The proposal includes the phrase “Homes that are not adequately heated” and this implies that there are issues with the condition and facilities in our homes however we know that the council achieved the Welsh Housing Quality Standard in 2014 and overall satisfaction with our homes remains high.

Inadequate heating of a home can be caused by inefficient or intermittent use of the heating system by the occupiers and this can also be linked to affordability through fuel poverty.

Energy Efficiency

In 2017/18 a full stock condition survey has been carried out and we have information on the energy performance of 80% of council owned homes.

For the Welsh Housing Quality Standard (WHQS), properties are required to achieve a “D” rating. The Councils Corporate Plan is currently for all council homes to achieve “C” rating by 2022.

We have developed a programme to ensure our homes are warm and energy efficient and this is detailed in Appendix 1.

Advice and Support

In September 2018 we partnered with Citizens Advice Denbighshire (CAD) to provide direct advice through a dedicated advisor to support council tenants with fuel poverty and damp and condensation issues. In addition the specialist advisor has been able to provide feedback to us on customer behaviour with regards to heating their homes.

To date, 205 tenants have gained additional income and 30 tenants have been removed from fuel poverty.

We published a guide to avoiding condensation in our Autumn 2018 newsletter which was sent to the home of every council tenant. We have produced this as a leaflet (appendix 2) that is made available to tenants experiencing condensation and the issues discussed with them. We are looking to develop a short film for social media as this is likely to be more effective channel to highlight condensation.

Whilst delivering a session for Housing and Maintenance staff on condensation we took the opportunity to remind staff how to support tenants on the effective use of storage heaters. Electric heating tends to be unpopular however if used correctly storage heaters can provide a more constant heat throughout the day and night which can particularly benefit older people who may be at home for longer periods. We have therefore asked staff to discuss this with tenants when visiting homes with electric heating and we have produced a leaflet on the effective use of storage heaters.

STAR (Survey of Tenants and Residents)

Community Housing carries out a survey of all our Tenants and Residents every 2 years. The feedback from this survey informs our plans and helps identify areas we need to improve.

The results in 2017 were good and we are pleased that the feedback from the latest returns in January 2019 continue to improve. Headlines are included in appendix 3.

4.2 To review the long-term impact of the ending of the resident warden service from its sheltered housing schemes

Around a third of Denbighshire Housing stock is designated for older people aged over 55. We have a number of schemes that previously had a residential warden on site. The role was very generic and required some core rent funding but also some Supporting People funding due to an element of the role that was deemed to provide care and support albeit at a very low level.

The review in 2014 that led to the change concluded that resources could be better deployed in providing specialist support that individuals need regardless of their housing tenure.

This has led to a legacy that some residents feel they lost the reassurance that the on-site warden provided and has led to claims that residents can become more isolated and excluded and the risk that this brings.

The Support Independent Living Service (SIL) was established to help tenants through the change and provide ongoing low level support where needed. These cases were reviewed in 2017 and a report is attached in appendix 4.

A review has been carried out by Community Housing appendix 5 which has concluded that a return to the previous resident warden role is not feasible. This is due to the lack of support based funding and also that a warden role provides generic support regardless of need. It could be argued that this has the potential to increase isolation as residents rely on the daily contact and not seek other social interaction opportunities.

The centres at the traditional “sheltered” schemes are vibrant communal places where a number of activities are held including health and well-being activities such as Arm Chair exercises. Some are arranged by the Housing team and some are arranged by the residents group. The existence of these residents groups also provides opportunities for residents to be involved and active.

5. How does the decision contribute to the Corporate Priorities?

Housing and Resilient Communities are corporate priorities

6. What will it cost and how will it affect other services?

The cost to improve the energy performance of council homes will be contained within the Housing Revenue Account (HRA).

7. What are the main conclusions of the Well-being Impact Assessment?

An impact assessment was not required for this report as no changes are proposed

8. What consultations have been carried out with Scrutiny and others?

This report provide a response to feedback from Community Housing tenants obtained during the Wales Audit Office site visits.

9. Chief Finance Officer Statement

The costs associated with services and maintenance for council housing are contained within the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) Business Plan. The plan for 2019/20 was approved by Cabinet in January 2019.

10. What risks are there and is there anything we can do to reduce them?

The risk are that we fail to implement the proposals for improvement. This report outlines our response.

11. Power to make the Decision

11.1 Section 21 of the Local Government Act 2000

11.2 Section 7.4.2(b) details Scrutiny’s powers with respect of policy objectives, performance targets and/or particular service areas.

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