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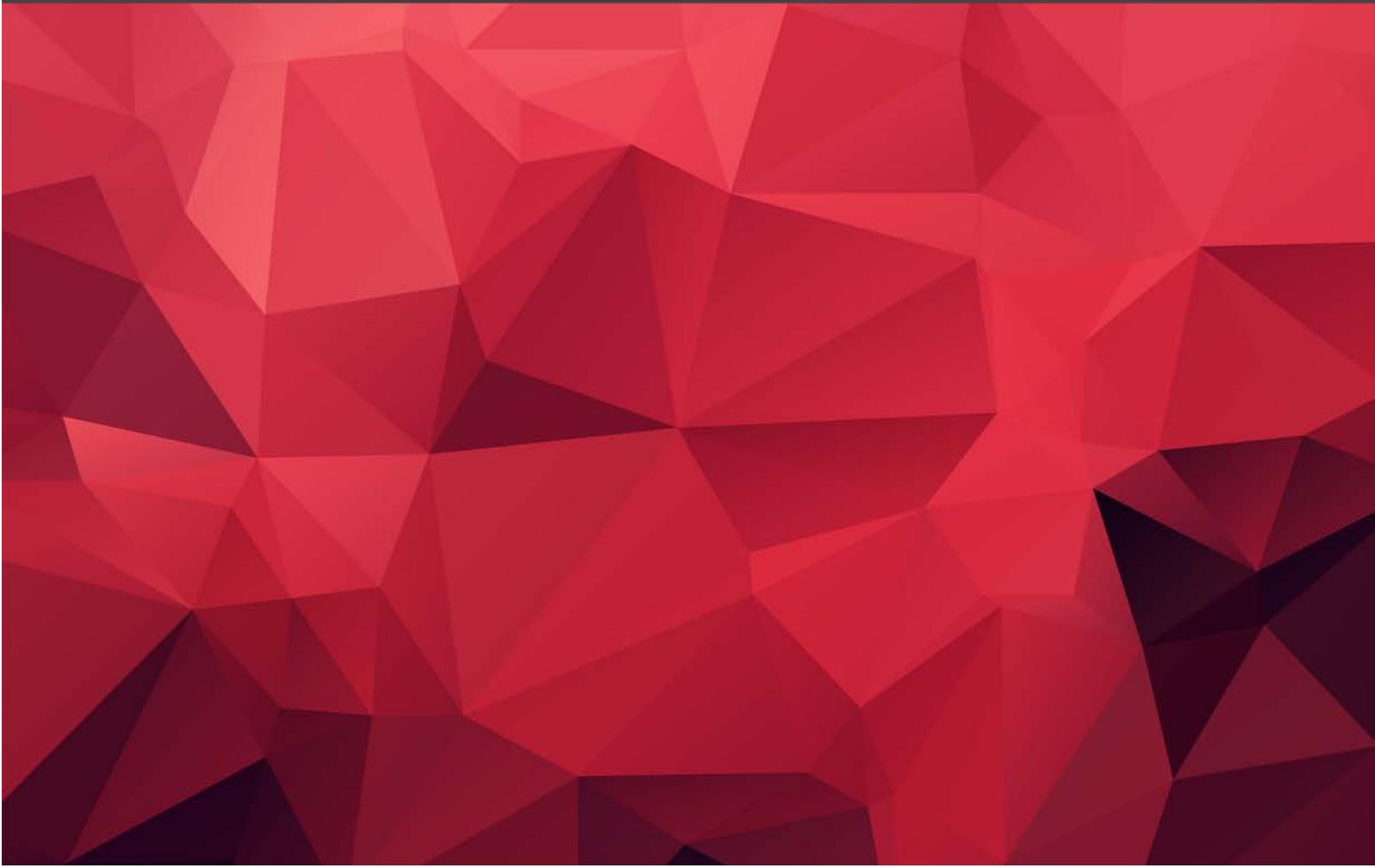
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The Service User Perspective – the Welsh Housing Quality Standard – **Wrexham County Borough Council**

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Mae'r ddogfen hon hefyd ar gael yn Gymraeg. This document is also available in Welsh.

The team who delivered the work comprised Paul Goodlad, Charlotte Owen, Richard Hayward, Gwilym Bury and Jeremy Evans directed by Huw Rees.

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Summary report

- 1 In housing, as in many local government service areas, users have no choice of service provider or, where alternative providers exist, their choice is limited by cost or other reasons. In this situation, their ability to influence services to meet their needs relies on users having a 'voice' in service design.
- 2 It is especially important that service users can feed in their views, experiences and hopes as the Council decides which services to reduce, increase or change in the current environment where finances are under pressure. The Council's decision, for example, to end the sheltered-housing dedicated site-based warden services is to:
 - try to use resources more efficiently;
 - try and help a wider group of tenants; and
 - create a more enabling environment.Housing services are only partially affected by these financial pressures, as the Wrexham housing services is largely financed from the Housing Revenue Account (Capital and Revenue) and remains at present fully funded. The Council's 30-year business plan sets out how investment will continue to improve the housing stock. Taking account of the users' voice means redesigned services are more likely to meet people's needs and be better value for money.
- 3 The Welsh Government stresses the importance of developing a partnership with citizens. Involvement is one of the five ways of working and it requires local authorities to adapt to meet the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 (WFG Act). And in its Local Government White Paper (January 2017) the Welsh Government states:

'We want to develop a more equal partnership with citizens. The role of public services should be to support people to live independent lives and to seek to de-escalate demand, intervening only when necessary and only for as long as required. In doing so, the focus inevitably shifts to prevention and a public service that is able to put more effort into helping people to avoid crisis, rather than one which is focused on supporting people in crisis. This is about creating prudent public services for the future.'¹
- 4 In 2017-18, the Wales Audit Office completed work to understand the 'service user perspective' at every Council within Wales. We followed a broadly similar approach at each council, although we agreed the specific focus and approach to the work with each one individually. In Wrexham County Borough Council (the Council), we reviewed the housing service. In particular, tenants' engagement with, and degree of choice experienced in, delivering the Welsh Housing Quality Standard (WHQS) and their view on the quality of the service they receive from the Council.
- 5 In 2001, the Welsh Government set out its long-term vision for housing in Wales entitled **Better Homes for People in Wales**. The WHQS is the Welsh Government

¹ Welsh Government, **White Paper Reforming Local Government: Resilient and Renewed**, January 2017.

standard of housing quality. The WHQS was first introduced in 2002 and aims to ensure that all dwellings are of good quality and suitable for the needs of existing and future residents. The Welsh Government set a target for all social landlords to improve their housing stock to meet the WHQS as soon as possible, but in any event by 2020.

- 6 The Council decided against transferring its housing stock following a tenant ballot which rejected stock transfer, and it is confident it will achieve WHQS compliance by the end of December 2020. Consequently, the Council retains its housing stock and role as landlord. It is one of 11 councils in Wales to do so. The Council is one of six remaining councils still having stock which is not fully compliant as at March 2017 with only five councils reporting² 100% compliance.
- 7 The Council owns approximately 11,207 properties of which it reported that 2,751 properties met the standard to 'full compliance' and 7,786 did not as at 31 March 2017. A further 670 properties which the Council reported did not meet the standard were judged to be 'acceptable fails' as defined by the Welsh Government in its guidance. Full compliance refers to dwellings where the WHQS standard is achieved for all individual elements, but there can be situations where achieving the standard for an individual element is not possible. Such situations may include the cost or timing of the work, residents choosing not to have the work done or where there are physical constraints to the work. In these instances, the social landlords may record one or more elements as acceptable fails. Where a dwelling contains one or more acceptable fails but all other elements are compliant, the dwelling is deemed by the Welsh Government to be compliant subject to acceptable fails.
- 8 Although we could not talk to everyone, engaging with a sample of service users³ helped us better understand their perspective. In addition, we held a focus group with the Wrexham Tenants and Members Partnership (WTMP) and visited some of the Council's housing estates. This information, as well as data on performance and service standards, informed our discussions with the Council. This helped us understand the Council's rationale for their approach to WHQS, and how the Council approaches and responds to the needs and expectations of service users.
- 9 Overall, we found that **the Council is making good progress towards achieving the Welsh Housing Quality Standard and most Council tenants are satisfied with the quality of the service they receive, but tenant involvement in service design needs to be strengthened and modernised.**

² Welsh Government, **Welsh Housing Quality Standard Welsh Government Annual Report, October 2016.**

³ We spoke to a sample of 84 tenants, of which 27 were sheltered housing tenants. We conducted a doorstep survey, Appendix 1 shows details.

10 We came to this conclusion because:

- the Council is making good progress towards achieving the WHQS by the end of December 2020 and is improving its arrangements for contractor management;
- tenant engagement has worked well in the past but is now insufficient to capture everyone's views;
- most Council tenants are satisfied with the quality of the service and their homes; and
- tenants can access the services they need but the Council has not always evaluated the impact of changes it has made to service standards.

Proposals for improvement

Exhibit 1: proposals for improvement

Proposals for improvement	
P1	The Council should work with tenants to review its approach to tenant engagement.
P2	The Council should review the impact of the ending of the resident warden service from its sheltered housing schemes.
P3	The Council should monitor the impact of the changes it has made to contractor management to ensure that the revised arrangements resolve the issues it has experienced.

Detailed report

The Council is making good progress towards achieving the Welsh Housing Quality Standard and most Council tenants are satisfied with the quality of the service they receive, but tenant involvement in service design needs to be strengthened and modernised

The Council is making good progress towards achieving the WHQS by the end of December 2020 and is improving its arrangements for contractor management

- 11 The Council engaged widely with stakeholders on its housing modernisation programme for WHQS and estate improvements. It is making good progress on its five-year plan to achieve the WHQS by December 2020. For example, most homes have been fitted with new kitchens and bathrooms. The Council consulted on the proposed timetable for carrying out WHQS works. It used the results to help shape its plan with work on kitchens and bathrooms being completed before beginning external works such as replacing roofs. Individual tenants were given a significant voice in how the WHQS work was undertaken in their homes with considerable choice about the type of new kitchen and bathroom units. Tenant feedback on the early stages of WHQS also prompted the Council to review its implementation with more officers working on day-to-day contact with tenants as the work was carried out.
- 12 The Council's WHQS programme is successfully raising housing quality. The Council has a capital programme in place for the next five years. It is designed to ensure the standard is achieved by the end of December 2020 and then maintained in future years, with components such as windows and roofs replaced when required.
- 13 Although the majority of tenants we spoke to feel their homes were warm enough in winter, 12% did not. Often these were homes which did not meet the WHQS standard for warmth (SAP 65⁴ or above rating), usually where tenants had declined improvement work. Over recent years the Council has invested in a range of new approaches, such as solar panels, external wall insulation, and air source heat pumps to help overcome the problem of cold homes. The Council will be investing

⁴ SAP 65. 2015. The WHQS states the Welsh Government vision that 'all households in Wales.... shall have the opportunity to live in good quality homes that are adequately heated, fuel efficient and well insulated.' The target energy rating to comply with the WHQS is a Standard Assessment Procedure (SAP) rating of 65.

additional resources in future years to address the issue of the few remaining homes which did not meet the WHQS standard for warmth.

- 14 The Council needs to further strengthen its monitoring of contractor performance in the future delivery of WHQS with a more independent and robust approach. For example, the 'WHQS offer' is sometimes inconsistent between contractors and we saw examples where less assertive tenants were getting a poorer design of kitchen than their neighbours. The checking of WHQS is often given to agency staff with variations in interpretation of satisfactory compliance. The procedure for recording tenant satisfaction is potentially open to influence by contractors. The Council has experienced several other challenges with some of its contractors such as non-payment of local sub-contractors.
- 15 The Council is addressing this issue and has retendered procurement contracts for voids and external works. It has included more robust penalties for failure to deliver. Restructuring of housing teams has strengthened the surveying and clerk of works roles and the Council believes that better oversight of future work undertaken is in place. The Council needs to closely monitor the impact of its improvements to ensure the changes have resolved the issues it has experienced.
- 16 A review of all customer engagement across all services in the housing service is taking place. However some of the staff we spoke to felt that the procedure for recording tenant satisfaction in internal works such as kitchens and bathrooms is still at present potentially open to influence by contractors. All other aspects of tenant satisfaction feedback are now managed in-house.

Tenant engagement has worked well in the past but is now insufficient to capture everyone's views

- 17 Most of the tenants we spoke to value the housing service and many commented on the quality customer service provided by most housing staff. They were grateful to still have what they regarded as a good service for carrying out repairs by the Council's own directly employed staff. They also valued having local housing offices near to where they lived.
- 18 The housing staff we spoke to have a good understanding of the needs of tenants. Through their daily interactions with tenants, staff receive regular feedback and opinions. This provides a useful and informal conduit of information between tenants and the service. It complements the comments available through day-to-day repairs satisfaction feedback forms and the online comments facility on the Council's website. Housing staff also attend local estate events to promote the housing service and speak to members of the public. This includes non-tenants such as Right to Buy owners, who often form most of the people living on an estate.
- 19 The Council has longstanding established mechanisms for formal consultation, and officers and members meet regularly with tenants through local tenant associations and the Wrexham Tenants and Members Partnership (WTMP) group of 12 tenants.

The WTMP membership is largely drawn from the local groups, and provides a formal method to consult and gain feedback from tenants. There is a newsletter delivered four times a year to all tenants' homes which provides feedback and information. The WTMP members help produce this newsletter. The housing service also surveys all tenants every few years to gain feedback on performance, but the last survey was in 2013. The Council has improved its use of technology to communicate with tenants and has over 1,600 people signed up to its Tenant Facebook page.

- 20 However, the Council recognises that formal tenant involvement and engagement have declined in recent years. Although the Council does have a Participation Strategy and the Council's new local tenant engagement strategy, which was out of date, has been recently approved and a tenant conference is planned for September 2018. The number of active tenants and recognised tenants groups has declined since its peak at the time of the stock transfer ballot over ten years ago. The WTMP group is not an effective or representative enough approach to gaining the views of 11,000 tenants and consumes a lot of officer time in engaging with very few people.
- 21 The Council has one member of staff to work with tenants to involve them in shaping and influencing service delivery. However, we saw little evidence, apart from one scheme at Plas Madoc, where residents are being engaged with and offered choices to help shape future services.

Most Council tenants are satisfied with the quality of the service and their homes

- 22 Most of the tenants we spoke to value the housing service and many commented on the quality customer service provided by most housing staff. They were grateful to still have what they regarded as a good service for carrying out repairs by the Council's own directly employed staff. They also valued having local housing offices near to where they lived.
- 23 Our survey of tenants showed that people are very satisfied with the quality of the housing service:
- 60% of the tenants we spoke to feel the Council listens to and acts on what they say about the condition of their home. Although boundary fencing is an issue for some.
 - 77% of the tenants we spoke to were happy with the quality of their kitchens and 86% were happy with their new bathrooms.
 - 91% of the tenants we spoke to thought that their neighbourhood is a good place to live.
- 24 Our survey of tenants showed that only 4% of the tenants we spoke to felt they had problems with damp and condensation in their home. We have conducted a similar survey in the last 12 months at all 11 councils that retained their housing stock, and this issue is a more significant problem elsewhere in Wales.

- 25 Some of the tenants we spoke to are dissatisfied (48%) with the environment outside their home. They also felt there is a lack of consistency over issues such as fencing and off-street parking. However, the Council is just beginning its WHQS external works programme which may address these issues over the coming years.

Tenants can access the services they need but the Council has not always evaluated the impact of changes it has made to service standards

- 26 Most of the tenants we spoke to felt they could access the housing services they needed, and the housing service opening hours in local offices are convenient for them. The housing section of the Council's website provides a convenient way for residents to provide feedback to the Council. The complaints procedure is publicised on the website and resulting statistics are centrally monitored and reported to members. Within the housing section of the Council's website there is an easy-to-use way for tenants to provide feedback. Although the Council recognises it could do more to increase the range of access to Housing services through the internet.
- 27 The Council has a range of performance targets for the Housing service, such as responding to repairs requests, and the targets are subject to regular scrutiny by senior officers and members. Although, in the past, the housing service has worked with the tenant group WTMP on a range of innovative ways to measure changes to the service, such as evaluating how local estate offices function. This practice has declined. The Council currently relies predominantly on key performance indicators and satisfaction surveys to evaluate the service. Only 30% of the tenants we spoke to felt that in the last three years they had been asked for their views on the housing service, although the housing service does offer to visit every tenant at their home annually.
- 28 The housing service has not evaluated the impact of service change in sheltered housing. Many of the sheltered housing tenants we spoke to told us they value the housing service and are happy in their homes. However, they feel that although they are informed of and consulted about changes, the level of service has declined. Some of the tenants we spoke to regret the withdrawal of the dedicated site-based warden service and as a consequence some felt lonely and isolated.

Appendix 1

Infographic summarising the key findings from the completed surveys

Exhibit 2: housing service infographic



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Most tenants are happy with the standard of their homes

The Council has fitted new kitchens and bathrooms in the majority of council homes and most tenants we spoke to were pleased with these rooms:



77%

of tenants we spoke to were happy with the condition of their kitchen



86%

of tenants we spoke to were happy with the condition of their bathroom

But the Council has only just started improvement works to the outsides of people homes and fewer tenants were happy with the outside of their homes:



52%

of those we spoke to were happy with how the outside of their home looks. Fencing and off-street parking were common problem areas

.....

Most tenants find their homes warm enough and very few reported problems with damp:



88%

of those we spoke to thought that all the rooms in their home were warm enough in the Winter



4%

of tenants we spoke to have experienced problems with damp or mould in their home

Most tenants we spoke to are happy with the estate they live on:



91%

of tenants we spoke to think their estate/neighbourhood is a good place to live



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Read the full report on Wrexham County Borough Council's housing service on our website: www.audit.wales

We spoke to 84 tenants. This represents around 1% of all council tenant households.

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