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# The Service User Perspective – the Welsh Housing Quality Standard – **Powys County Council**

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# Summary report

## Summary

- 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. 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 adopt 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.'<sup>1</sup>
- 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 Powys County 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 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 and it is confident it will achieve WHQS compliance by 2020. Consequently, the Council retains its housing

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

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 reporting<sup>2</sup> 100% compliance.

- 7 The Council owns 5,326 properties of which it reported that 3,242 properties met the standard to 'full compliance' and 456 did not as at 31 March 2017. The Council reported that a further 1,628 properties met the standard where they were judged to be 'acceptable fails' as defined by the Welsh Government in its guidance on compliance<sup>3</sup>.
- 8 Although we could not talk to everyone, engaging with a sample of service users<sup>4</sup> helped us better understand their perspective. In addition, we held a focus group with the Powys Tenant Scrutiny Panel (the TSP), a further focus group with local tenants and residents, and visited a few 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 progress towards achieving the Welsh Housing Quality Standard for many components and most Council tenants are satisfied with the quality of the service and their homes, but it needs to accelerate its approach to ensuring tenants' homes are warm.**
- 10 We came to this conclusion because:
  - the Council is making progress towards achieving the Welsh Housing Quality Standard for many components by 2020, but it needs to accelerate its approach to ensuring tenants' homes are warm;
  - tenant engagement has worked well in the past but now needs to be built upon and strengthened to gather more views; and
  - most Council tenants are very satisfied with the quality of the service and their homes.

<sup>2</sup> Welsh Government, **Welsh Housing Quality Standard Welsh Government Annual Report**, October 2016

<sup>3</sup> 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.

<sup>4</sup> We spoke to a sample of 321 tenants and leaseholders. We conducted a phone survey, Appendix 1 shows details.

## Proposals for improvement

### Exhibit 1: proposals for improvement

Proposals for improvement	
P1	The Council should urgently strengthen the future delivery of the WHQS by accelerating its development of a comprehensive strategy and action plan to address the issues facing tenants who are living in cold homes.
P2	The Council should continue to work with tenants to strengthen its approach to assisting people experiencing problems with condensation and damp.
P3	The Council should strengthen its approach to engagement and explore more innovative ways to reach the many people who are hard to reach due to the geographical challenges of living in Powys.

# Detailed report

The Council is making progress towards achieving the Welsh Housing Quality Standard for many components and most Council tenants are satisfied with the quality of the service and their homes, but it needs to accelerate its approach to ensuring tenants' homes are warm

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- 11 The Council engaged widely with stakeholders on its housing modernisation programme for WHQS and estate improvements. For example, the Council produces an 'Investing in Your Homes' newsletter for tenants which is very clear, well presented and informative. It clearly shows what has happened in the previous six months and an update on the schedule of works over the coming six months along with other relevant updates, such as on gas boiler servicing. Tenants are encouraged to complete the WHQS questionnaire, following works being carried out, by being entered a prize draw for £100.
- 12 Individual tenants were given a significant voice in how the WHQS work was undertaken in their homes. They had a considerable number of choices, for example, kitchen tiles (colours and shapes), worktop, unit doors, flooring and taps and whether new front doors are solid or glass. Tenants from the TPS are members of the 'Investing in Your Home Sub Group'. This group of tenants attends progress meetings with specific contract monitoring officers and reviews progress on WHQS work and tenant satisfaction results. Tenant feedback on some of the early WHQS contracts highlighted problems with how the work was carried out and delays completing works. The Council worked with the 'Investing in Your Home Sub Group' to review its implementation, with more Tenant Liaison officers working on day-to-day contact with tenants as the work was carried out.
- 13 The Council recognises its system for recording which homes meet the WHQS standard for warmth is inaccurate and incomplete. The Council believed that in July 2018 it had 2,326 homes (43%) which did not yet meet the WHQS standard for warmth (SAP 65<sup>5</sup> or above rating). The number reported to the Welsh Government in March 2017 was 2,084. Our survey of tenants showed that 23% of the tenants

<sup>5</sup> SAP 65. 2015. 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.

we spoke to find it difficult to heat their homes to a comfortable level in winter. The Council has invested additional resources in the last few years to gather accurate assessments of SAP ratings in all its homes. However, this work is still incomplete, and we were told by officers that some of the existing SAP data is inaccurate on such matters as the thickness of loft insulation and whether double glazing is fitted.

- 14 Powys has the highest percentage of Council homes not on a mains gas supply in Wales and the previous Council WHQS policy was to view all homes located 'off gas' as an acceptable fail. In recent years, the Council has begun to change its approach. It is now investing in a range of new approaches to help overcome the problem of cold homes in 'off gas' areas. These include already installing in a number of homes solar panels, oil central heating, external wall insulation, and air source heat pumps. The Council is planning to formalise this new approach and develop a strategy and associated action plan to address the issues facing tenants who are living in cold homes.
- 15 Our survey of tenants showed that 77% of the tenants we spoke to felt they had no problems with damp and condensation, but 23% were concerned. 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 problem across Wales. Damp and condensation issues are a complex problem, and without conducting a full house survey we cannot say why tenants in Powys reported this issue. We did not undertake the survey on all the estates in Powys and most of the officers we spoke to felt that on a few estates there are some issues of damp. These affected homes are at more exposed locations with more rainfall and frequent high winds, leading to greater water penetration. Furthermore, the Council recognises that on one estate design issues are a significant cause of damp and condensation and future capital works will try to address this issue. The Council officers we spoke to show a positive and sophisticated understanding to addressing the issues of damp and condensation. The Council is adopting a holistic approach while investing additional resources of £0.5 million in future years to address the issue.
- 16 A high percentage of the work is undertaken by contractors based in Wales (£19.2 million so far with contractors based in Wales). The tenants we surveyed are generally pleased (83%) with the work that is carried out. The Council is committed to community benefits from WHQS both in terms of local employment and opportunities for apprentices and additional works for the community carried out by contractors. For example, new external fire doors at a scout hut in Brecon and a bricklaying course held at high school by one of the local contractors.
- 17 The Council recognises that contractor performance is variable especially where sub-contracting by large national companies occurred. The Council has also experienced other challenges with some of its private contractors becoming over committed to other work.



## Tenant engagement has worked well in the past but now needs to be built upon and strengthened to gather more views

- 18 Through their daily interactions with tenants, staff receive regular feedback and opinions from tenants. This provides a useful and informal conduit of information between tenants and the service, and ensures that officers have a good understanding of tenant needs. A dedicated team (Tenant Liaison Officers) work to support tenants on all aspects of the WHQS programme. Housing staff also attend local estate events to promote the housing service and speak to members of the public. 'Tenants Talk Together' meetings on estates are jointly run by officers and tenants to obtain feedback on local issues. Ad hoc estate events do take place, but due to pressures on staff estate inspections do not occur on a regular basis in all areas and there is no coordinated planned and publicised programme of estate walkabouts. The Council no longer runs an annual garden competition for its tenants, which many other landlords still use as an informal, inexpensive, and fun way to organise systematic visits to many housing estates. The Garden competition has in part been replaced by a bi-monthly 'Star Tenant' award scheme, open to tenants, councillors and staff to nominate tenants who make a significant contribution to the life of their community.
- 19 The Council has long-standing established mechanisms for formal consultation, and officers and members meet regularly with tenants through four local tenant associations and the TSP group of about 14 tenants. The TSP 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 twice a year to all tenants' homes which provides feedback and information. The TSP members help produce this newsletter. The housing service also surveys all tenants every few years to gain feedback on performance, and TSP members helped design the survey questions in the most recent survey. In addition, there is the Housing Services Group 100 (current membership is seventy-two). This is a group of volunteer tenants who are consulted by email, telephone or postal survey on a chosen area of the housing service, such as day to day repairs.
- 20 However, the Council recognises that tenant involvement requires new approaches, which it is developing, to ensure everyone continues to have a voice. The Council's local tenant engagement strategy is currently being reviewed. The number of active tenants and recognised tenant groups is relatively small (6). Although we only spoke to a few of the tenants who participated in the groups, some of them felt that in the past they have been largely ignored by the housing service. However, they thought that tenant support had improved in the last few years. One local tenant and resident association (TRA) we spoke to felt they are still isolated, and receive little help from the Council. Engaging with communities about new affordable housing, using existing events and networks, such as school fairs and agricultural events, shows the Council is beginning to develop new approaches to gathering the views of citizens.

21 There are various fun days and other events where staff informally engage with tenants about planned future changes. An example of these are the estate action days. Following the estate action days officers develop estate action plans in response to the feedback and survey forms completed by residents. In 2018-19 the Council has a budget of approximately £2 million for estate improvements to, in part, take forward the ideas generated from the estate action days.

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

22 Our survey of tenants showed that people are very satisfied with the quality of the housing service:

- eighty-three per cent of the tenants we spoke to are satisfied with the housing services they receive;
- sixty-three per cent of the tenants we spoke to feel the Council listens to their views on their home;
- eighty-three per cent of the tenants we spoke to are satisfied with the improvement works the council has carried out on their homes;
- seventy-three per cent of the tenants we spoke to are satisfied with the environment outside their home;
- ninety per cent of the tenants we spoke to were happy with the quality of their kitchens, and eighty per cent were happy with their new bathrooms; and
- ninety per cent of the tenants we spoke to thought that their neighbourhood is a good place to live.

23 The Council recognises it could do more to increase the range of ways tenants and potential tenants can get access to Housing services. For example, by using the internet. It also recognises that the Housing service section of the Council website is poorly designed and difficult to use. We found that the website contains some useful information, but pages are difficult to locate. Few of the forms and documents can be completed online. The Council is working to improve this, for example, the 'Getting Involved' application form can now be completed on line rather than having to be downloaded and posted back to the Council. The use of social media in Powys is limited. Although there is a tenant Facebook page, the poor Broadband access we observed in some areas of the county makes its greater use a challenge.

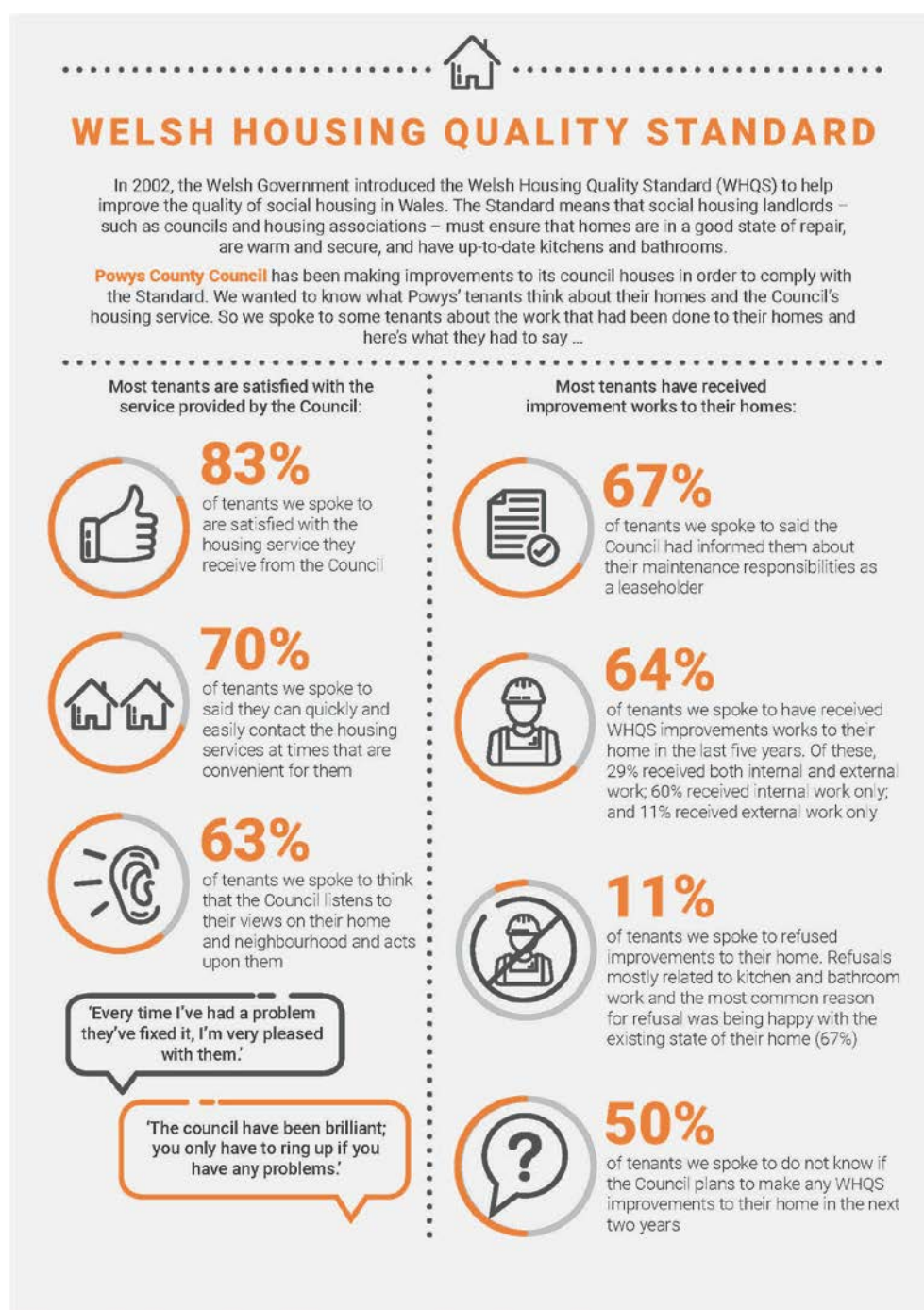
24 The telephone service for tenants to contact the Council is well publicised, and the tenants we spoke to felt it worked well. Seventy per cent of the people we spoke to in the survey felt they could quickly and easily contact the housing service at times that were convenient for them.

- 25 The Council Housing Strategy, 2016-2020, has a set of measures which link to clear outcomes, such as, tackling fuel poverty. The performance measures have set targets, and the performance information and targets are subject to regular scrutiny by senior officers and by members at scrutiny committees. The Council relies predominantly on key performance indicators and satisfaction surveys to evaluate the service's work against the strategy.

# Appendix 1

## Infographic summarising the key findings from the completed surveys

Exhibit 2: housing service infographic



Most tenants are happy with the condition of their homes and the WHQS improvements the Council has made:



**83%**

of tenants we spoke to are satisfied with the improvement works the Council has carried out on their home



**77%**

of those we spoke to said the Council completed the improvement works within the specified timescale



**69%**

of tenants we spoke to were involved in the design or specification of some of the improvement works to their home



**90%**

of tenants we spoke to are satisfied with the overall condition of their kitchen



**85%**

of tenants we spoke to are satisfied with the overall condition of their bathroom



**73%**

of tenants we spoke to are satisfied with how the outside of their home looks



**90%**

of tenants we spoke to are satisfied with their neighbourhood as a place to live

'The improvements are better for me.'

'They did a marvellous job of everything, it's wonderful.'

'Kitchens and bathroom are lovely. Outside needs a lot of renovating.'

'I'm happy, the outside is brilliant.'

Some tenants find their homes are not warm enough in winter and some told us they had problems with damp:



**23%**

of tenants we spoke to find it difficult to heat their homes to a comfortable level in the winter. Draught proofing and an old or poor heating system were the most common reasons cited



**23%**

of tenants we spoke to had experienced problems with damp in their home. In most cases, tenants identified the damp through visible mould or wet patches and had informed the Council of the problem

Read the full report on Powys County Council's housing service on our website: [www.audit.wales](http://www.audit.wales)

We spoke to 321 tenants and leaseholders. This represents around 6% of all Council managed households.

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