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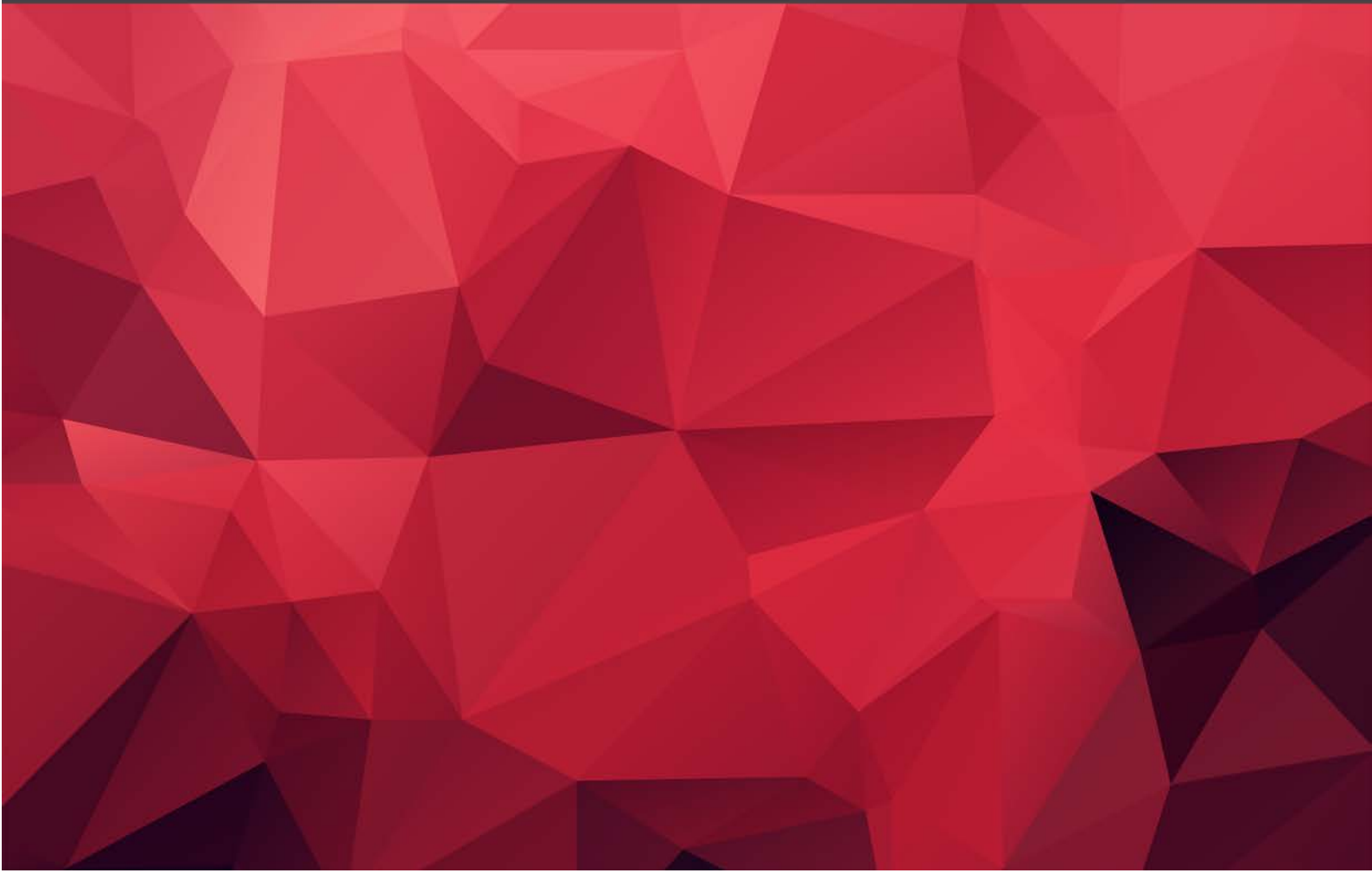
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Auditor General for Wales

The Service User Perspective – the Welsh Housing Quality Standard – **Flintshire County 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. 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.'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 Flintshire 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 following a tenant ballot which rejected stock transfer, and it is confident it will achieve WHQS compliance by 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

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

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 7,167 properties of which it reported that 24 properties met the standard to ‘full compliance’ and 7,143 did not as at 31 March 2017. The Council reported that it believed none of its properties were judged to be ‘acceptable fails’ as defined by the Welsh Government in its guidance³. 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. However, the Council did report that some individual elements of some homes are currently acceptable fails (such as 1,334 kitchens where tenants have refused the offer) but it still hopes that by December 2020 most of these will have had the improvements carried out.
- 8 Although we could not talk to everyone, engaging with a sample of service users⁴ helped us better understand their perspective. In addition, we held a focus group with the Flintshire Tenants Federation (the Federation) 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 and their homes.**
- 10 We came to this conclusion because:
- the Council is making good progress towards achieving the WHQS by December 2020;
 - tenant engagement has worked well in the past with good officer involvement and the Council is actively developing new approaches to ensure everyone continues to have a voice;

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

³ Since undertaking the fieldwork the Council has been continuing to make progress on WHQS works and as at 10 August 2018 reported that 1,288 properties meet the standard in full with a further 727 meeting the standard as an ‘acceptable fail.’

⁴ We spoke to a sample of 96 tenants. We conducted a doorstep survey, Appendix 1 shows details.

- most Council tenants are satisfied with the quality of the service and their homes; and
- tenants can access the services they need, and the Council has tried to address the impact of service change.

Detailed report

The Council is making good progress towards achieving Welsh Housing Quality Standard and most Council tenants are satisfied with the quality of the service and their homes

The Council is making good progress towards achieving the WHQS by December 2020

- 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, which is supported by appropriate funding, 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. Looking longer term the Council has plans in place aimed at ensuring that housing quality is maintained, for example, making sure that components such as windows and roofs are replaced when required.
- 12 Tenants receive an annual letter detailing the planned WHQS work for the year ahead and can phone the Housing service to get updates on progress. 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 early stages of the 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.
- 13 The Council takes an independent and robust approach to the monitoring of contractor performance and takes action where quality issues are identified. Most of the tenants we spoke to did not feel there is generally any inconsistency in the kitchens and bathrooms offered by the different contractors or in the quality of work. The councillors we spoke to have a detailed knowledge and understanding of their local areas and also believed that arrangements are in place to monitor and challenge contractor performance.
- 14 The Council has 617 homes which did not yet meet the WHQS standard for warmth (SAP 65⁵ or above rating). Over recent years the Council has invested in a range of new approaches, such as external wall insulation, to help overcome the problem of cold homes. The Council is investing additional resources in future

⁵ 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.

years to address the issue of the remaining homes which did not meet the WHQS standard for warmth.

Tenant engagement has worked well in the past with good officer involvement and the Council is actively developing new approaches to ensure everyone continues to have a voice

- 15 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. A dedicated team (Tenant Involvement Officers) work to support tenants on all aspects of the WHQS programme, such as a selection of kitchen worktop colours and finishes. Accommodation Support Officers, who provide a range of support for new tenants during the first year of their tenancy, also provide further support for work on WHQS related issues. 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.
- 16 The Council has long-standing established mechanisms for formal consultation, and officers and members meet regularly with tenants through local tenant associations and the Federation group of about 20 tenants. The Federation membership is largely drawn from the local groups, and provides a formal method to consult and gain feedback from tenants. Federation members also are invited to participate in the selection of contractors for WHQS work. There is a newsletter delivered twice a year to all tenants' homes which provides feedback and information. The Federation members help produce this newsletter. The housing service also surveys all tenants every few years to gain feedback on performance. Although the last survey was in 2013 a new survey is planned for 2018.
- 17 However, the Council recognises that tenant involvement has declined in recent years and is actively developing new approaches to ensure everyone continues to have a voice. Although the Council does have an Engagement Strategy the Council's local tenant engagement strategy is out of date. The number of active tenants and recognised tenants groups has declined since its peak at the time of the stock transfer ballot over six years ago. The Federation is not a sufficiently representative approach to gaining the views of 7,000 tenants and consumes officer time in engaging with a small group of people.
- 18 The Housing service section of the website is well designed and easy to use. There is an annual sheltered housing conference which over a hundred residents attend and various fun days and other events where staff informally engage with tenants about planned changes, such as on the introduction of new service charges.

19 One member of staff is working with tenants to involve them more in shaping and influencing future service delivery. However, at present, engagement work is focused understandably on the WHQS programme and we saw little evidence where residents are routinely engaged with and offered other choices to help shape future housing services.

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

20 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 a local housing office near to where they lived.

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

- 66% 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.
- 92% of the tenants we spoke to were happy with the quality of their kitchens and 85% were happy with their new bathrooms.
- 89% of the tenants we spoke to thought that their neighbourhood is a good place to live.

22 Our survey of tenants showed that only seven per cent 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. Damp and condensation issues are a complex problem, and without conducting a full house survey we cannot say why tenants in Flintshire reported this issue. We did not undertake the survey on all of the estates in Flintshire and some staff we spoke to felt that on a few estates there are some issues of damp, where affected homes are at more exposed locations where there is more rainfall and frequent high winds leading to greater water penetration.

23 Although the majority of tenants we spoke to feel their homes were warm enough in winter, 24% did not. The fieldwork was undertaken during the coldest week of the winter and this may have affected the survey results. Also a large number of the tenants who reported to us feeling cold in their homes in winter are living in the three high rise blocks in Flint; whilst generally happy some felt the newly installed radiator in one room, their lounge, provides inadequate heating.

24 Some of the tenants we spoke to are dissatisfied (only 56% are happy) with the environment outside their home. They also felt there is a lack of consistency over issues such as fencing. However, the Council is just beginning its WHQS external

works programme which they believe will address these issues over the coming years.

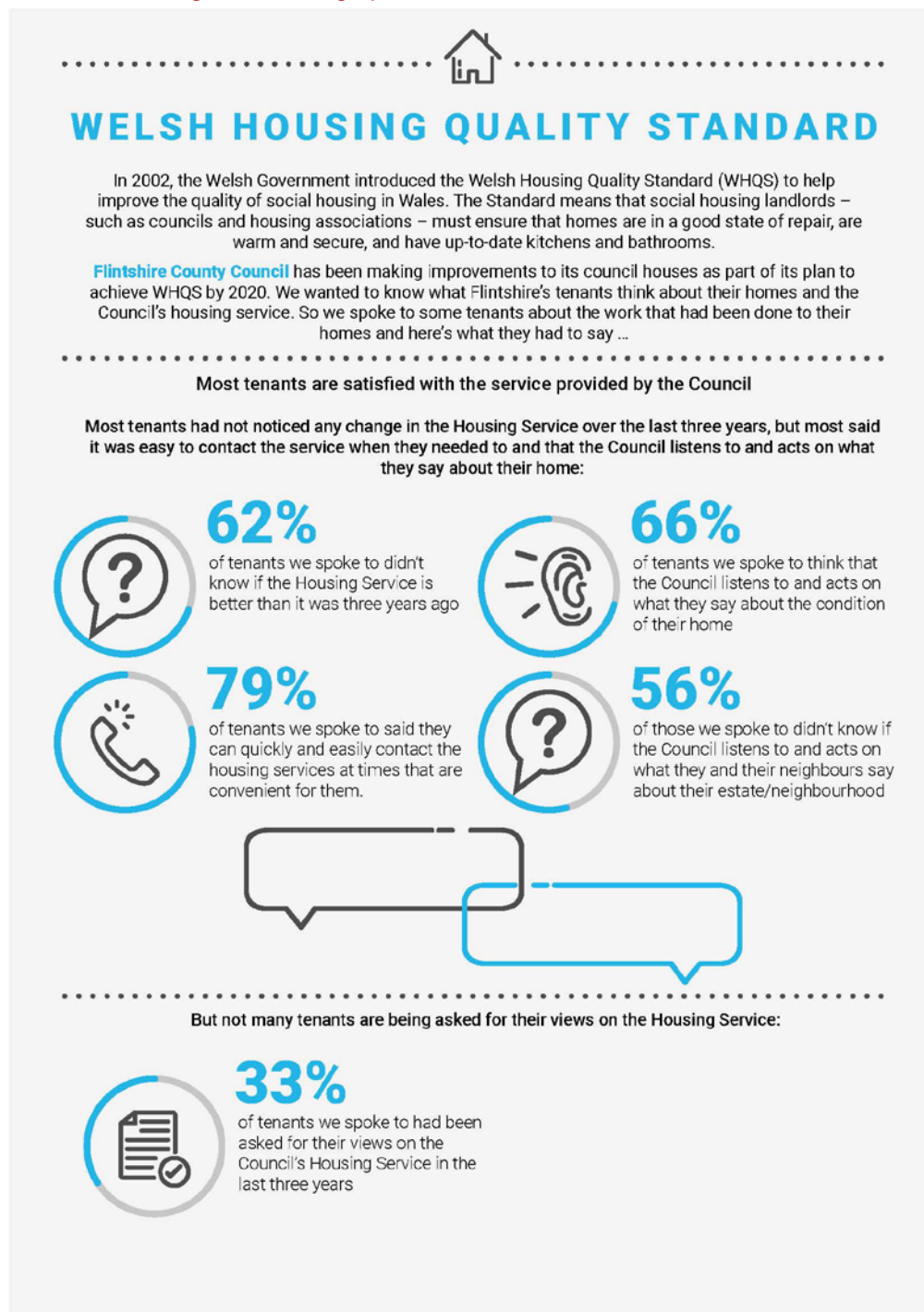
Tenants can access the services they need, and the Council has tried to address the impact of service change

- 25 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. The telephone service for tenants to contact the Council is well publicised and the tenants we spoke to felt it worked well.
- 26 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 councillors. Although, in the past, the housing service has worked with the Federation on a range of innovative ways to measure changes to the service, such as mystery shopping, this practice has declined. The Council currently relies predominantly on key performance indicators and satisfaction surveys to evaluate the service. Only 33% of the tenants we spoke to felt that in the last three years they had been asked for their views on the housing service.
- 27 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 and consulted about changes, the level of service has declined over time. At one scheme we were told that a well-used communal lounge and centre had been removed to provide an additional flat with no alternative provision being offered, and as a consequence the residents we spoke to now felt more isolated. Many of the sheltered housing tenants we spoke to regret the withdrawal of the dedicated site-based warden service and its replacement with a community-based accomodation service across Flintshire, and as a consequence some felt lonely and isolated. The new service concentrates on providing high-level support to those tenants with the greatest need for support based on an objective assessment. In addition, the Council engages the befriending services of third-sector agencies to drop in and chat to provide the good neighbour services which the Council can no longer offer..

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:

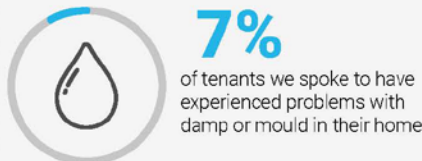


But the Council has only just started improvement works to the outsides of people homes and fewer tenants we spoke to were happy with the outside of their homes:



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



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



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

We spoke to 96 tenants. This represents around 1% of all council tenant households.

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