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The Service User Perspective – the Welsh Housing Quality Standard – **Isle of Anglesey County Council**

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Summary report

- 1 In housing, as in many local government service areas, users have no option to choose between service providers 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 'voice' in service design.
- 2 It is especially important that service users can feed 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 it requires local authorities to adopt to meet the requirements of the 2015 Well-being of Future Generations Act (WFG Act). Its Local Government White Paper (January 2017) 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 council individually. In the Isle of Anglesey 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, Welsh Government set out its long-term vision for housing in Wales entitled Better Homes for People in Wales. The Welsh Housing Quality Standard (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 to achieve WHQS, as it was confident it would achieve compliance by 2013. Consequently, the Council retains its housing stock and role as landlord. It is one of 11 councils in Wales to do so. The Council and only four other councils reported² 100% compliance as at

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

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

March 2016, with the remaining six councils still having stock which was not fully compliant.

- 7 The Council owns approximately 3,792 properties of which 2,715 properties met the standard to 'full compliance' as at 31 March 2017. The 1,077 properties which 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. Of the five councils in Wales who have reported full compliance the Council has the highest percentage of stock (28%) with 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 Môn Tenants and Officers Voice group, and visited the majority 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 most of the Council tenants we spoke to were satisfied with the quality of service, but they are less involved in service design than they have been, and the Council has not always evaluated the impact of changes to the service. We came to this conclusion because:
 - before 2015 the Council effectively involved tenants in service design on WHQS, but tenant involvement has declined since;
 - most Council tenants are satisfied with the quality of the service although many had concerns about damp and mould; and
 - tenants can access the services they need but the Council has not always evaluated changes it has made to access models and service standards for sheltered housing.

³ We spoke to a sample of 119 tenants. We conducted a doorstep survey, Appendix 1 shows details.

Proposals for improvement

Exhibit 1: proposals for improvement

Proposals for Improvement	
P1	The Council should work with tenants to review its approach to assisting people experiencing problems with condensation and damp.
P2	The Council should work with tenants to review the long-term impact of the ending of the resident warden service from its sheltered housing schemes.

Detailed report

Overall we found that most of the Council tenants we spoke to were satisfied with the quality of service, but they are less involved in service design than they have been, and the Council has not always evaluated the impact of changes to the service

Before 2015 the Council effectively involved tenants in service design on WHQS, but tenant involvement has declined since

- 10 The Council engaged widely with stakeholders on its housing modernisation programme for WHQS and estate improvements in the period 2008 to 2015. There is also evidence of the housing service adapting its proposals in response to feedback. For example, the Council consulted on the proposed timetable for carrying out works. It used the results to help shape its plan with work on kitchens and bathrooms being completed before 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 units. Tenant feedback on 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.
- 11 More recently, the Council has engaged extensively on a programme of planned capital works to the exterior of many homes, such as new roofs and external rendering. This shows extensive well-planned engagement with residents both before, during and after the works are carried out. The consultation involved a variety of methods to target a diverse range of people, including people with protected characteristics and access issues who would not have been able to easily attend traditional public meetings. Because of the feedback received, the Council altered the design of the proposed new works using suggestions from the public to develop, for example, more parking bays in communal areas. The Council shares the results of its consultations, and its response to the issues raised, in a tenant newsletter delivered to all Council homes.
- 12 The Council also engages with tenants on an ongoing basis. The Council's Local Tenant Participation Strategy (LTPS 2018 to 2023) was developed with tenants and is designed to outline their commitment to tenant participation. It is supported by an action plan that sets out timescales and intended outcomes. The Council meets regularly with tenants through local tenants groups, its Sheltered Housing

forum, and the Môt Tenants and Officers Voice group (MTOV)⁴. The MTOV membership is largely drawn from the local groups, and provides a formal method to consult and gain feedback from tenants. The housing service also surveys its users every few years to gain feedback on performance, and insight into the priorities of tenants. The Council's last STAR⁵ survey showed overall high levels of tenant satisfaction. The Council is planning to run a new STAR survey in 2018 for all tenants to provide new feedback.

- 13 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 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 the majority of people living on an estate.
- 14 The scale of the engagement of the Housing Service's work in involving service users in the design and delivery of the service has declined since 2015. For example, the tenants group we spoke to (MTOV) felt they were not as involved in the shaping of services as they had been previously. Numbers of tenants taking part in MTOV had declined since 2015, and the number of officers employed to support tenants groups has reduced from two to one in the last year but since our fieldwork the Council has recruited an additional officer to drive forward the tenant engagement agenda.
- 15 The Council is no longer robustly monitoring the outcomes of tenant participation. The Council suggests the LTPS action plan is monitored (quarterly by the MTOV group and annually by Scrutiny Committee) and that the Tenant Participation Officer prepares an annual progress report. No report was produced in 2016 but one was produced recently. The minutes we looked at did not indicate that the monitoring of the action plan was sufficiently robust with little action to address lack of progress.
- 16 The LTPS suggests the Council has improved its use of technology to communicate with tenants (eg, social media/greater use of resident specific website). However, the survey reflects that further improvements are needed and there is no monitoring of IT usage except at the Council HUB sites. It also notes that they are adapting to the needs of tenants by offering more community-based

⁴ Since our fieldwork was undertaken the Council has re-branded MTOV as the 'LTPS Monitoring Group'.

⁵ STAR (Survey of Tenants and Residents) is a questionnaire designed around customer care and covers all areas within Isle of Anglesey Housing Services. Last survey October 2015.

activities rather than formal tenant meetings – but the Council acknowledges more informal activities are needed.

Most Council tenants are satisfied with the quality of the service although many had concerns about damp and mould

- 17 The Council's WHQS programme has successfully raised housing quality and the Council has a capital programme in place for the next five years. This is designed to ensure that the standard is maintained as components, such as windows and roofs, are replaced. Our survey with tenants also showed that people are very satisfied with the quality of the housing service:
- 61% of the tenants we spoke to feel the Council listens to and acts on what they say about the condition of their home.
 - 82% of the tenants we spoke to believe the Council listens to and acts on what they and their neighbours say about their neighbourhood. Although car parking and boundary fencing are issues for some.
 - 89% of the tenants we spoke to were happy (and many were very proud) with the quality of their kitchens. Many praised the way the Council had given them a real choice in the design of their new kitchens.
 - 94% of the tenants we spoke to thought that their neighbourhood is a good place to live.
- 18 Most of the tenants we spoke to value the housing service highly and many commented on the high level of customer service provided by most housing staff. Although some tenants we spoke to were critical of the centralised Council-wide telephone service for reporting day-to-day repairs, they commented that 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.
- 19 Although the overwhelming 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 65⁶ or above rating). The Council judged these as 'acceptable fails' usually because the tenant had, in the past, refused to allow access for WHQS work, or because the cost of remedy was considered too great, typically because gas or oil central heating could not be easily supplied. Over recent years several councils and Housing Associations in Wales have invested in a range of new approaches, such as solar panels and external wall insulation, to help overcome the problem of cold homes. After feeding back on our fieldwork, the Council decided to invest an additional £1 million a year between

⁶ 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 WHQS is a Standard Assessment Procedure (SAP) rating of 65.

2018 to 2020 to address the issue of homes which did not meet the WHQS standard for warmth.

20 Our survey with tenants also showed that 37% of the tenants we spoke to felt they had problems with damp and condensation in their home. Damp and condensation issues are a complex problem and without conducting a full house survey we cannot say why so many tenants reported this issue. However, we have conducted a similar survey in the last 12 months at all 11 councils which retained their housing stock, and this is one of the highest recorded percentages of tenants reporting problems with damp and condensation in their homes. The most frequent causes of damp and condensation are:

- where people do not adequately heat all the rooms in their homes, typically leading to damp and condensation in bedrooms;
- people not ventilating their home adequately, typically by closing air vents and not opening windows;
- structural problems, typically failure of old damp proof courses or water penetration through walls and roofs; and
- better insulated and draught-proofed homes.

Other social landlords after undertaking WHQS work in Wales have also reported that the effect of making homes better insulated and draught proof has increased damp and condensation problems. This has particularly affected homes at more exposed locations where there is more rainfall and frequent high winds, leading to greater water penetration.

21 The Council is reviewing its process for investigating reports of damp and condensation and intends that in future surveyors will gather more information on damp in homes and raise awareness on how to avoid and eliminate condensation during tenant forums, workshops, newsletters, and conferences.

22 Our conversations with tenants suggest that complaints are being investigated, although usually without the problem being resolved to their satisfaction. The level of tenant dissatisfaction is unlikely to reduce without resolving the multiple causes of damp and condensation in tenants' homes.

Tenants can access the services they need but the Council has not always evaluated changes it has made to access models and service standards for sheltered housing

23 Most of the tenants we spoke to felt they could access the housing services they needed, and that the housing service opening hours are convenient for them. The Council has a dedicated and well-designed housing section on its website, and has invested in allowing access for those without computers at home at several community HUBS throughout the island. Within the housing section of the Council

website there is an easy-to-use way for tenants to provide feedback. The Council's complaints procedure is also available on the Council's website and results are centrally monitored.

- 24 The Council does not always evaluate changes it makes to the services provided to tenants. For example, 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. But some of the tenants we spoke to expressed dissatisfaction about the time it took to initially report a repair by phone. The time it takes tenants to report a repair cannot be easily monitored through the Council-wide phone system.
- 25 Although, in the past, the housing service has worked with MTOV on a range of innovative ways to measure changes to the service (such as through tenant inspectors) this practice has declined. The Council currently relies on key performance indicators and satisfaction surveys to evaluate changes to the service.
- 26 There has been no systematic exercise by the housing service to evaluate the long-term impact where significant service change has taken place. For example, many of the sheltered housing tenants we spoke to told us that they value the housing service and are happy in their homes. However, they feel that although they are informed of changes, the level of service has declined and their views are not always listened to. The tenants we spoke to regret the withdrawal of the dedicated site-base warden service and some felt lonely and isolated as a result. At two schemes we visited, the arrangements for the fire-alarm service in which wardens used to play a role in checking and resetting alarms, is a concern to some tenants. We were told alarms are sometimes taking over an hour to be reset by external contractors and their concerns were not being addressed.

Appendix 1

Infographic summarising the key findings from the completed surveys

Exhibit 2: housing service infographic



But a number of people told us they had problems with damp:



37%

of tenants we spoke to had experienced problems with damp or mould in their home. Many were unhappy with the Council's response or failure to fix the problem

We told the Council about people's concerns and it responded by developing a strategy to help it better deal with damp problems in future.

The residents of sheltered housing schemes we spoke to regret losing their dedicated warden service and some felt lonely and isolated as a result

'I feel lonely since the removal of the warden service.'



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

We spoke to 119 tenants. This represents around 3% of all council tenant households.

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