



WDC Tenant Scrutiny Panel Recommendations Report

Subject: Low Compliance with SHQS - Scrutiny exercise 2017/18

Date: October 2018

Background

This is the fourth scrutiny exercise carried out by the Scrutiny Panel, which was set up in 2014 to act as a 'critical friend' and take a tenant's view of housing services performance.

The Panel looked closely at the results of last year's ARC returns and felt that West Dunbartonshire's performance in the area of SHQS compliance was lower than average (in the bottom quartile for ARC return), and as most members had personal experience of going through SHQS works with the Council, from both the tenant and owners side, they were keen to investigate the process more to see if this was an area that they wished to scrutinise.

The Panel looked at local analysis comparing WDCs performance against 4 neighbouring housing organisations:

% of homes meeting SHQS

- WDC – 88.2%, Stock 10,580
- East Dunbartonshire Council – 98.2%, Stock 3,561
- Renfrewshire Council – 91.4%, Stock 12,220
- Stirling Council – 98.1%, Stock 5,646
- River Clyde Homes – 89.4%, Stock 5,878

This again highlighted that there was a much lower level of SHQS compliance in the West Dunbartonshire and that there was room for improvement.

The Panel gathered information that showed that 5.4% were exempt as they are planned for demolition and that 682 properties were in 'abeyance' (for various works including loft insulation and door entry). Even taking the exemptions into account, this still put WDC in the second bottom quartile for SHQS compliance with the Scottish average being 98.5%. The most common reason being cited for the properties in abeyance was that owners were not agreeing to the works.

The Panel wanted to target these properties in greater detail to find out why the works aren't getting done, what the reasons for the abeyances were and what could be done to help them reach compliance.

These background investigations lead the Panel to decide to scrutinise in detail Outcome 4 – Quality of Housing, Charter Indicator 7 - % of stock meeting the Scottish Housing Quality Standard (SHQS)

The Panel then looked at what WDC had already committed itself to with regard to improving this standard and found out the following:

In WDC's Charter Improvement Plan 2017/2018 it was highlighted that the tenants were not satisfied with the quality of their home. Comments were that there was a poor communication around the Capital Programme and tenants had a view that their home still required upgrades / improvements. The action that has been put in place to rectify this is:

- Improve communication around Capital Investment Programme with things such as standing article in the housing news, before and after photos, publicises via internet and explore production of an annual booklet.

Therefore the Panel also wanted to make sure that what had already been said would be done, had a plan of action in place to make it happen.

The Panel also looked at what the Scottish Housing Regulator looks for from organisations when assessing the ARC returns so they could gauge what the important things to look out for.

When the SHR released their Annual Risk assessment for 2017 it stated the following on SHQS data:

“When we assess risk to the quality of tenant’s homes and consider the level of assurance we need, we are keen to ensure that landlords have a robust asset management strategy and plan. We also expect landlords to have good quality information in place to inform planned investment costs, liabilities and projected spend. We will therefore consider:

- ✓ *How landlords are addressing houses which fail SHQS*
- ✓ *Landlords awareness of stock condition – and in particular the age and scope of stock quality information as well as future survey plans and*
- ✓ *Any deterioration in performance on abeyances or exemptions.*

We will also look at a landlord’s ability to meet its maintenance obligations in general. Where a landlord is not meeting the requirements of the SHQS or there are other potential issues highlighted from the stock quality risk assessment, we may seek additional assurance from the landlord.”

Information Gathered

The exercise involved examining key information from senior staff, meeting with staff responsible for managing the service and conducting a customer survey to provide a snap shot of the customers (both tenants and owners) experience.

To start with the Panel came up with a set of initial questions to ask the Capital Investment team that they felt would help create a picture of the whole process for them.

The initial questions were as follows:

- Which elements of the SHQS are most commonly refused, and please provide a breakdown of specific numbers and reasons for all refusals ?
- Can we have a copy of the staff procedures that outline the process followed from identifying properties that don't meet SHQS to bringing them up the standard?
- Can we have a copy of the letters sent to encourage people to agree to the work and the timescales for how long between each letter etc?
- Can you clarify if owners and tenant's letters are different and if so provide copies of each?
- How often since April 2015 is SHQS work completed as part of the relet standard?
- How often since April 2015 has it happened that a common element deteriorates so much that it becomes a 'necessary renewal' that you can do without the need for owner's consent?
Can you give an example of when this jurisdiction has been used and outline the timeline of action.
- Any other information you think will help us understand your process in meeting SHQS compliance.

The Panel went through the information which was sent back to them and this then prompted follow on questions which they wished to asked. Following receipt of this information the Panel felt they needed to focus on a few key points:

- The information stated that roofs were only renewed if necessary and after a verification survey. There was discussion around roof renewals and it is felt that owners are not informed in advance enough on what is happening with their roofs.
- The Panel asked to see evidence of the verification survey and to know if owners are provided with this information. Good communication and verification of information was important to the Panel for tenants as well as owners involved with SHQS works.
- The Panel asked for a timeline of what contact has been made with the tenants/owners in abeyance over the communal lighting upgrades to get them to participate.
- The Panel also asked what information/assistance is offered to those tenants that refuse SHQS upgrades such as Gas Central Heating, Kitchen and Bathrooms, to try to encourage them to participate.

Visit to the Capital Investments Team

At the visit the Panel agreed to focus on the following:

- To look at secure common front door entry systems from both tenant and owners perspective
- To look at Loft insulations and Roof renewals from both tenants and owners perspective.
- To look at Internal upgrades to tenant's properties e.g. central heating, bathroom and kitchen works.

The questions to be asked where:

1. How was the work identified? (Saville' s survey, repairs)
2. How do you notify owners and tenants of upcoming works? (wording of letters used, how often is contact made etc.)
3. What happens when there is full agreement for the works? -process, communication
4. What happens if there is no agreement over the proposed works? – process, communication

The Panel viewed the databases on which all properties information are kept, and how this is updated and also how re-profiling is recorded. The Panel noticed that work by Maintenance & Repairs team didn't seem to get recorded on this database unless the Capital team were informed.

The Panel found out that the Savills survey was carried out in 2013 and so information on this is now dated and that the database has limitations such as not allowing access to the property pictures.

There is still the ongoing problem of getting access into people's homes to carry out full surveys to check property condition to replace cloned information from the Savills survey - this is necessary for information on properties to be accurate. The Panel asked how many surveyors the Capital Investment team had to keep up to date with condition surveys and the Panel felt the team was not able to deliver this adequately with numbers of staff. (2 unfilled posts)

The Panel asked what happens if a tenant feels they are in need of a new kitchen etc, and they established that if a tenant wishes they can have Repairs look at an element they feel needs renewed, then a proforma is sent to Capital Investment team to carry forward if necessary. Re-verification surveys can take time however. Capital and Repairs and Maintenance systems don't link together very well however and should show when a property receives a repair that would extend the lifespan of an element under SHQS.

The Panel found out that batches of 50 letters are sent out at the beginning of the financial year for properties that are being highlighted as requiring SHQS works, those that do not respond to these letters are chased up with phone calls.

Further Scrutiny

The Panel also looked at a case study for a roof renewal and this led them to discover that some information was missing about dates for surveys on roofs. The Savills survey was carried out in 2013. The roof in the case study was then resurveyed after this date but no record kept of the date of this survey. Information on the roof such as date for renewal under SHQS works was then updated based on this information, but no record kept of the date of the survey that prompted the renewal date change.

The Panel looked at examples of letters sent out and they have been the same for a number of years and the wording was felt to be off-putting and too long. So the Panel made changes to 2 of the letters to make them more reader friendly and more encouraging for owners to agree to participate with the works. When looking at the letters for roof renewals, it was also felt that it would be beneficial if owners got a copy of repair history sent out that the letter refers to so they are clear of the reasons for the renewal. (Copy of letters as appendices.)

The Panel also wished to have feedback first hand from tenants and owners who had recently had capital works carried out so a survey was constructed and 200 surveys were sent out. 23 responses came back which is a reasonable response rate and were very positive, this result ties in with feedback from general repairs survey results.

Positive Changes Noted

Owners meetings and open days are now held for multi-storey flats where tenants and owners are invited to pick colours of tiles etc, Effort is made to involve the owners as much as possible, 2 meetings would be held, one during the day and one in the evening. This was viewed very positively and the Panel are keen to see this approach adopted for all SHQS work.

There were 3 abeyances for the common lighting element but due to the creation of a 'HIT' list by the Capital Investment team these have now been completed. Extra effort is being made to get access to properties that they have previously failed to get into. Bathroom refusals are now being targeted on the Hit list.

Refusal forms are now completed with a reason being asked for refusing so if it's for something such as needing help to pack up items - this can be discussed and assistance given, with end goal being to get more people to agree to the works. The team is also chasing up properties that have previously been refusals to get more to agree to works.

IHMS will also be beneficial as tenants and factored owners will be able to access the front customer end of the system to see what information the

Council has on the condition of their properties. IHMS will also help information sharing between departments if utilised effectively.

Key Recommendations with timescales

Action number	Action description	To be completed
1.	More members of qualified staff urgently needed to enable ongoing surveys to be carried out on properties to ensure Savills information is kept up to date. (2 posts unfilled)	6 months
2.	In relation to keeping stock information up to date, any re-inspections should be recorded and dates of inspections and outcomes recorded so there is accurate, detailed record of all surveys carried out at properties. Already started but processes need to be updated to reflect this new practice.	6 months
3.	Improved communication should help encourage owners to get involved and the Panel recommend an owners leaflet detailing SHQS works .	6 months
4.	To improve communication and help owners plan and save, owners should also to be given as much notice as possible of what is scheduled for renewal on their property in that year.	1 month
5.	Meetings should be called for all owners in communal blocks where SHQS works are proposed.	12 Months
6.	Repair history and a breakdown of proposed costs to be sent out with owners letters to help improve transparency about the work needed.	1 month
7.	Review all letters and make them easier to read to encourage people to agree to work.	3 months
8.	Repairs team and Capital Investment team need to link up more and share information, this procedure needs to be processed mapped for when IHMS comes in to ensure information is shared as part of an improved process.	July 2019

9.	Communication could also be improved by using Housing News to highlight to tenants what SHQS work covers, the progress on SHQS works are to help encourage tenants to allow work to be done.	3 months
10.	Online information should be made available also to owners detailing the progress on the SHQS works and what is required.	1 month
11.	Look at other Council's provision of Capital Programmes and learn from Good Practice with regard to improving engagement to reduce abeyances.	6 months

Thanks and appreciation

The Scrutiny Panel are grateful for the co-operation of Alan Young, Gary Miller, Frances Ashton and the Capital Investment Team in providing information and assistance in completing this scrutiny exercise.

The Scrutiny Panel members involved in this project were;

Rita Howard	Paul Moore
Ian Blair	Gary McBain
Fiona McClymont	Martin Heely

The Panel were supported by Jane Mack, Tenant Participation Officer and Kathryn Kelly, Strategic Housing Officer.

Appendices.

1. Current letter to tenants regarding loft insulation
2. Panel's redrafted version of loft insulation letter
3. Current letter to owners regarding roof renewals.
4. Panel's redrafted version of roof renewal letter

