

To: Wheatley Housing Group

By: Wheatley Group Scrutiny Panel (with support from Lesley Baird, TPAS Associate)

Environmental Thematic Review 3 October 2024

1. Introduction

The Wheatley Group Scrutiny Panel (“the Panel”) independently reviews and scrutinises the performance (related to the Scottish Social Housing Charter) of the four registered social landlords that make up Wheatley Group (“the Group”). This covers Wheatley Homes Glasgow (WHG), Wheatley Homes South (WHS), Wheatley Homes East (WHE) and Loretto Housing (LHA). The Panel plays an important role and feeds into the Group’s customer engagement approach by ensuring that customers are involved in scrutiny to help influence and co-design service improvements. The Panel includes around 25 customers representing each of the Group’s four social landlords.

Under our Terms of Reference, in addition to scrutinising the Group’s performance, the Panel can take a deeper dive into specific Group services and policies through thematic reviews, and where appropriate, make recommendations for how they can be improved for customers.

Following the positive experience of the repairs thematic review undertaken in 2023, the Panel chose **environmental services** as our next thematic topic. This was the ‘spotlight’ item at the Panel’s February 2024 meeting when the Director of Environmental Services provided an overview of the service. At the end of March 2024, members of the Panel who wished to take part in the review (“the thematic group”) attended a planning session with key staff to discuss the proposed areas of focus in more detail. The thematic group decided that the review should focus on **Neighbourhood Environmental Teams (NETs) services and waste management**.

This report has been developed by the thematic group, with the support of TPAS, and outlines the review including the brief; methodology; findings and recommendations.

2. Brief and background

As detailed above, at the March planning session the thematic group decided that the NETs service and waste management should be the focus for the thematic review. The thematic group developed a brief to:

- (1) determine an approach towards the review including any information requirements;
- (2) undertake fieldwork to identify areas of improvement including through analysing information, meeting with staff and site visits;
- (3) undertake to find out customers views through a survey and focus groups; and
- (4) work with TPAS to develop a report detailing findings and recommendations.

The thematic group members included:

- WHG – Chris Quinn, Margaret McMillan, Stephen King, Gerry McAdam (involved until site visits), Rhona Paterson (involved until customer engagement);
- WHS – Mary Muir, Jenni Graham, Doreen Hepburn; and
- LHA – Morag Pearson, Jacqui Kelly, Alison McDonald.

The thematic group was independently facilitated by Lesley Baird, TPAS Scotland Associate and supported by Morgan English, Wheatley Group Governance Projects and Policy Lead. Throughout the review, meeting notes, requests for information and data and action lists were maintained by Morgan English and circulated with the thematic group and internally to key business leads.

3. Methodology and information requested

Thematic meetings took place between April 2024 and October 2024; these were a mix of in-person and hybrid/virtual to allow the thematic group members to participate in a way that suited them. Following the planning session in March, the thematic group requested and received the following initial information to support their review:

- Customer insight: from recent Environmental customer panels and MyVoice customer satisfaction scores and feedback;

- Information on NETs Service Standards;
- Process flowcharts e.g. for waste management;
- Detail on local authority compared to Wheatley Group responsibilities; and
- Information on waste management costs.

Throughout the review, in addition to the above, the thematic group received and discussed a range of information (on request or as provided by the Group). This included:

- Keep Scotland Beautiful (KSB) information, criteria for specific geographies and example joint walkabout inspections;
- Example NETs 12-month programme and daily concierge workplans;
- Neighbourhood management policies and legal context e.g. around fly tipping;
- NETs App workflow; and
- Environmental operative job profile.

In addition, the thematic group wished to undertake site visits across the Group's geography to understand and consider the different contexts and service delivery e.g. the rural context of WHS. Three site visits were planned in partnership with KSB (with a KSB officer attending) to allow the thematic group to experience diverse stock types and the difference in NETs services provided. Thematic group members engaged with local staff and undertook a walkabout of the areas with service leads and Stronger Voices Officers using the KSB framework. In July 2024, members of the thematic group visited:

- **Dumfries**; Alloway Avenue and Curries Yard (new build development)
- **Edinburgh** - Slateford Green
- **Glasgow** - Halley Place

Following the site visits, the thematic group had a debrief of their walkabout findings with the Service Delivery Lead; in all cases the customers highlighted that the sites were well maintained. Any actions for improvement were shared with the Service Delivery Lead to progress. The customers were also presented with the outcome of a recent KSB assessment in the area, including the actions that had been identified.

Following the visits, the thematic group worked with the Group to develop a Customer Voice survey about environment services. As requested, a version was also created for Lowther owners although the thematic group noted that this customer group receive a different NETs service.

The survey was launched in August 2024 and received **435 responses** from tenants (47% return rate, survey sent to Customer Voices based on communication preference) and **57 responses** from Lowther owners (11% response rate of sample based on owners who receive NETs services).

Customers who completed the survey were invited to take part in focus groups to discuss the topics in further detail. These were facilitated by TPAS with thematic group members attending to observe, as well as an environmental Service Delivery Lead. Focus groups took place in September 2024 and included 10 WHG/LHA customers; 9 WHS customers; 7 WHE customers; and 1 Lowther owner.

Thereafter, the thematic group took time to reflect on and consider all the information received, and discussed the visits and insight from the customer engagement at a follow-up meeting with TPAS. Working with TPAS, the thematic group then developed this report and agreed their recommendations.

Throughout the review, the thematic group engaged with a range of Wheatley Group staff, including: Steven Gray, Director of Environmental Services; Sarah Selcraig, Environmental Service Lead (WHE); Eric Amato Environmental Service Lead (WHS); John Ross Snr Environmental service lead (West NE); John Ross Jnr, Environmental Service Lead (West, NW);, Leslie Irvin, Environmental Support Manager (WHS); Stuart Flynn, Environmental support manager (WHE); Conor Lanigan, Stronger Voices Manager; and Elizabeth Cuthbertson, Strategy & Performance Lead.

4. Findings and recommendations

The thematic group worked hard to scrutinise information, processes, and insight from the customer engagement and site visits.

In analysing the customer survey, the thematic group noted that the results provided a snapshot in time. While the response rate and method used were not considered representative, the results were used to inform questions for the follow-up focus groups. The survey output highlighted:

- Overall mixed experiences, with key themes in feedback around weeding, bins and bulk uplifts;
- Strong awareness of own responsibilities, however, focus needed on information about services and opportunities to engage; and
- Higher satisfaction with NETs service from tenants than owners.

The focus groups were themed around three key areas emphasised by the survey responses; **NETs service; waste management; and communication/engagement**. The focus groups allowed the thematic group to hear firsthand experiences from customers from across the Group. These discussions reinforced many of the themes highlighted from the thematic group's information analysis and the customer survey. Focus group discussions are summarised below:

- *NETs service*
 - Customers **value and appreciate the service** provided by NETs and the importance this has to communities; customers commented on the helpfulness of staff and their role in encouraging people to take pride in their area. Some customers had mixed experiences with the service, particularly customers in main door/four-in-a-block and mixed tenure properties who do not receive all services.
 - In terms of improvement with the service, **communication** was a key theme from the West focus groups; what's important to customers is that services are delivered when they should be. Customers are also keen to know who to contact for what services and who is responsible for which services (as some confusion with local authorities was noted).
 - Some customers in the West and South also highlighted **garden maintenance** support as an area for improvement, including scoping the introduction of a paid service. Some customers in the West and South also mentioned vermin as an issue, and dog fouling was raised in the East.

- *Waste management*
 - Fly tipping resonated as an issue, especially in the West.
 - Promoting opportunities to **recycle** (e.g. Home Comforts in the West, Foursquare in the East and Shacks in Stranraer) was stressed as important by customers, as well as advertising information about support for waste management e.g. costs for local council pick-up, how to request support for moving items or how to feedback issues to Wheatley Group to influence local authorities through partnership networks.

- *Communication and engagement*
 - Many customers highlighted they were not aware of **opportunities to engage**, however there was good awareness of walkabouts, litter picking and Keep Scotland Beautiful in WHS.
 - Customers suggested **digital information**, for example through quarterly emails or bulk texts and websites, which would help keep customers informed about services, important contacts and what is happening in a local area
 - Customers also noted **non-digital information** would be useful e.g. noticeboards/flyers in common areas that are kept updated about when to expect a service, quarterly newsletters (although some noted cost this incurs)
 - The Lowther owner also suggested improved two-way communication e.g. quarterly satisfaction surveys and site visits

Overall, the thematic group commented that they were pleased with the information provided and the free access to staff at all levels. The group agreed that they were impressed with the openness and willingness from all staff to engage and provide information, which supported the review process. All group meetings were collaborative and engaging.

The thematic group was impressed at the commitment, passion and enthusiasm shown by staff at all levels, and in particular, commented that the local NETs staff they engaged with at the site visits, including concierge and arborists, had a real sense of pride in their work. The thematic group noted that the local NETs staff were key pillars of the community and an important point of contact for many customers, often going above and beyond to support customers.

The thematic group recognised the progress and improvements that has been made to the environmental service, for example improvements in technology (SkyVac) and performance reporting (MyVoice for ad hoc services).

At points throughout the review, thematic group members also raised concerns, particularly related to visibility of communication around NETs services and engagement, and consistency and understanding around management of waste. Some members commented that they had different experiences within their own areas than was evidenced at the site visits.

As with last year's thematic review, **clarity of information and communication** were stressed as vital themes, ensuring customers are kept informed about upcoming NETs services and engagement, in advance, and are clear on their responsibilities as customers.

Therefore, in identifying any gaps, barriers and areas for improvement, the thematic group make the following recommendations:

Communication

1. Work with the thematic group to create a communication campaign to improve communication to customers around local environmental services, both through paper and digital forms, for example including:
 - a) Feedback to customers of actions identified/implemented following KSB assessments and walkabouts. For example, environmental services as a standing item in newsletters or quarterly email/bulk text linking to website;
 - b) Updating environmental services information on websites – use to promote good practice, upcoming opportunities to engage and good news stories;
 - c) Provide updated information at sites to inform and educate customers for example, NETs work programmes (when to expect a service); next KSB; clear information about reporting issues such as dog fouling, vermin or fly tipping; recycling advice; and other relevant support/contacts available to help maintain neighbourhoods.

2. Clear communication on customer responsibilities at sign-up e.g. around garden maintenance and waste management. Includes providing information for customers to uphold responsibilities (and signposting to support, with costs) and making clear the consequences of not upholding. Additional support for customers with additional needs such as New Scots customers or customers whose first language is not English.

3. Particularly for customers with a concierge service, ensure information around safety and security is clear and that staff are aware of this. For example, what to do if a crime occurs, and in addition, what is the process should there be CCTV.
4. Produce and promote clear information/guidance on the roles and responsibilities of Local Authorities, the Group and customers, particularly around waste management/bulk uplifts.

Keep Scotland Beautiful

5. Encourage and support KSB-trained customers from different areas to undertake assessments in other geographies to provide a different perspective and share learning. KSB reports should be sent to all KSB-trained customers in an area, rather than only those who attended the assessment, and there should be opportunity to visit the site at a later date to inspect the improvements made.
6. KSB assessment frameworks should be available locally for customers to complete in between walkabouts and formal KSB audits.

Processes

7. Review waste management to introduce a defined process e.g. consider charged service. Work with customers and local authorities to develop approaches to disrupt customer behaviour, encourage recycling and tackle areas of high fly tipping, for example, having a designated spot to leave bulk items for pick up by other customers, ahead of uplift or local 'help yourself' initiatives.
8. Ensure clear and consistent processes across the Group for Stronger Voices Officers in terms of their role in supporting environmental engagement e.g. promoting/ arranging NETs joint walkabouts, identifying/tracking actions, recruiting KSB assessors, and ongoing support for environmental projects (YouChoose).
9. With customers, develop and implement local "Rate your estate" assessment framework.
10. Scope the ability for customers to report environmental issues using photos.

11. Strengthen partnership working and communication with local authorities, rolling out good practice across the Group, and consider how customers can feedback insight to influence local authorities to take action.

12. Scope the introduction of a paid garden maintenance service.

5. Conclusion

TPAS thanks the thematic group and those members of Wheatley Group and KSB staff that contributed to this review. The thematic exercise exemplified collaborative working with colleagues and customers to identify areas of improvement in terms of the environmental services for the benefit of both customers and employees. In particular, TPAS also thanks Morgan English, Wheatley Group Governance Project and Policy Lead, for her support to the thematic group. Her hard work makes a massive contribution to the success of the Group Scrutiny Panel and their thematic activities.

The Board is asked to note the report and its recommendations and note that a response to the recommendations will be co-created with the thematic group and Wheatley Group staff.