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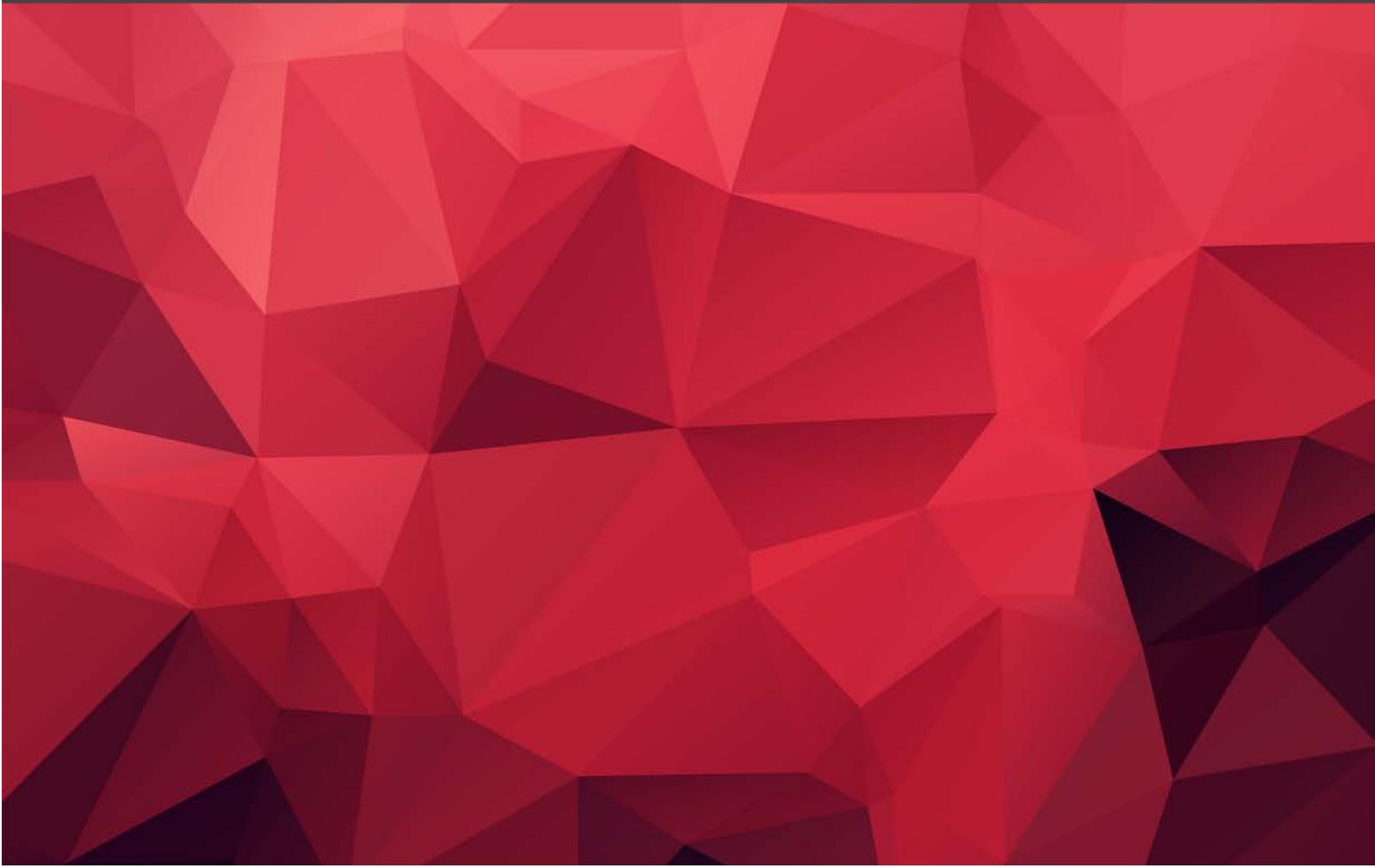
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# Welsh Housing Quality Standard Review including Council tenants' views – **City and County of Swansea Council**

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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 Katherine Simmons, Lisa McCarthy, Ron Price, Sara-Jane Byrne under the direction of Jane Holownia.

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# Summary report

## Summary

### What we looked at

- 1 We reviewed the Council's arrangements to meet the Welsh Housing Quality Standard (WHQS) by the Welsh Government's deadline of 2020. This included the quality of plans and programmes, housing stock condition information, monitoring and scrutiny arrangements, tenant satisfaction and the way in which WHQS was making a difference to tenants' lives.
- 2 The findings in this report are based on fieldwork that we undertook during the period April 2018 to August 2018, and a telephone survey of tenants and leaseholders. We spoke to 680 tenants and leaseholders as part of this telephone survey.

### Why achieving WHQS is important

- 3 Achieving WHQS is a key element of the Welsh Government's vision for housing in Wales. This standard is intended to set in place a common target standard for all social housing in Wales, and the Welsh Government expects all social housing landlords in Wales to adopt the standard and devise programme for bringing their homes up to the standard as soon as possible but by 2020 at the latest. The Welsh Government considers homes fully compliant when they meet all the individual elements of the standard around the condition, age and safety of the internal and external parts of the dwelling and elements like safe electrics, smoke alarms and energy efficiency requirements are met.
- 4 As at the 31 March 2018 the Council owned 13,528 dwellings, of which 3,415 dwellings were fully compliant with the WHQS and 193 dwellings were not compliant. The Council identified that 9,920 dwellings were compliant subject to acceptable fail guidance. The Welsh Government considers homes fully compliant when they meet all individual elements of the standard. But, social landlords may record one or more element as an acceptable fail, where achieving the standard for an individual element is not possible. The Welsh Government defines what can be determined as an acceptable fail. Examples of acceptable fails include the cost or timing of the work, residents' choice not to have the work done or where there are physical constraints to the work. Where a dwelling contains one or more acceptable fails, but all other elements are compliant, the Welsh Government deems the dwelling compliant subject to acceptable fails.

## How we approached the review

- 5 To inform our findings we reviewed a range of Council documents and interviewed a selection of senior officers, members and operational staff, and held focus groups with tenants both of traditional council housing and from sheltered housing schemes. Additionally, we carried out a telephone survey of tenants using an independent contractor. The telephone survey engaged 680 respondents divided between tenants and leaseholders and was carried out between 24 April and 9 May 2018. We have referenced the findings of the telephone survey, where relevant, in the body of this report and include an infographic page summarising our findings at [Appendix 1](#).
- 6 We also commissioned Tai Pawb, Diverse Cymru and Ethnic Minorities and Youth Engagement (EYST) Wales to undertake two focus groups: one with disabled Council tenants and one with BME council tenants. Despite considerable effort by all parties, including engaging with the Council's tenant participation team, the numbers of participants at the two focus groups was disappointing. Five tenants attended the BME focus group and one tenant attended the disabled tenants focus group. We have made a reference to a view of the BME focus group within the report but given the levels of participation it is difficult to draw any representative findings from these additional focus groups. We have provided a summary of the findings from the additional focus groups to Council officers.

## Overall finding

- 7 Our review sought to answer the question: Does the Council have effective arrangements in place to meet the Welsh Housing Quality Standard (WHQS) by 2020?
- 8 Overall, we found that: Tenants are satisfied with the improvement works and the Council has a sound approach to meeting the Welsh Housing Quality Standard by December 2020, but it needs more up-to-date plans, tenant engagement and focus on contracts and timescales to achieve it. We came to this conclusion because:
  - The Council's approach to WHQS is generally well-integrated into its strategic housing function, but some key plans need to be updated;
  - The Council has comprehensive stock condition information about its homes that effectively shapes its investment programme to meet the WHQS;
  - The Council has a programme in place to achieve the WHQS by December 2020, but delivery of the programme will be challenging and there is little room for any slippage;
  - More timely reporting and monitoring of the Council's progress in meeting the WHQS is necessary to ensure it meets the standard by December 2020, and that tenants are aware of the progress being made;

- Most tenants we spoke to are satisfied with the quality of improvement works done to their homes by the Council, and with the housing service they receive; and
- Most tenants we spoke to felt that the Council takes their views into consideration, but the Council could strengthen tenant engagement and make sure tenants are clear about why improvement works are needed.

## Proposals for Improvement

### Exhibit 1: proposals for Improvement

The table below sets out the proposals for improvement that we have identified following this review.

Proposals for improvement	
P1	The Council should provide more timely and transparent reporting of progress on WHQS to members and tenants.
P2	The Council should ensure there is effective monitoring and scrutiny of its progress so that any issues can be resolved quickly.
P3	The Council should procure any outstanding works as soon as possible and ensure there is robust monitoring of contracts so that works are completed on time and to the level of quality agreed.
P4	The Council should improve on its current arrangements to publicise arrangements for disruption payments to tenants in a clear, understandable and transparent way, and make sure tenants are aware of what they can and cannot claim for.
P5	The Council should strengthen how it engages with its tenants, including ensuring tenants are clear why and when works are being undertaken.
P6	The Council should update key plans, such as the Repairs, Maintenance and Improvement policy and the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) asset management plan.

# Detailed report

**Tenants are satisfied with the improvement works and the Council has a sound approach to meeting the Welsh Housing Quality Standard by December 2020, but it needs more up-to-date plans, tenant engagement and focus on contracts and timescales to achieve it**

**The Council's approach to WHQS is generally well-integrated into its strategic housing function, but some key plans need to be updated**

9 In reaching this conclusion we found that:

- Robust, comprehensive and wide-ranging plans are in place to support the Council's ambition to meet the WHQS by December 2020. These include the Swansea Housing Strategy 2015-2020, Housing Revenue Business Plan 2017-18, WHQS compliance policy and the Council's capital housing investment programme. However, the Council needs to review and update some plans, such as the Repairs, Maintenance and Improvement policy and the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) asset management policy.
- The Council is taking an elemental approach to bringing its homes up to the WHQS, having largely completed the essential external works to dwellings and now focusing on kitchen and bathroom programmes leading up to the December 2020 deadline.
- The WHQS programme supports other Council housing priorities, such as energy efficiency, the safety of high rise blocks of flats including fire safety, and ensuring that homes are weather proof and resilient.

**The Council has comprehensive stock condition information about its homes that effectively shapes its investment programme to meet the WHQS**

10 In reaching this conclusion we found that:

- Stock condition surveys have been carried out by external consultants every five years.
- Stock condition surveys have covered the key elements of WHQS compliance.

- Stock condition surveys are supported by regular in-house surveys which have also covered Energy Performance Certification (EPCs) and asbestos type and location surveys.
- The Council uses the stock condition information to inform its Capital Housing Investment Programme.

## The Council has a programme in place to achieve the WHQS by December 2020, but delivery of the programme will be challenging and there is little room for any slippage

11 In reaching this conclusion we found that:

- The Council has a capital programme in place which sets out the work needed to be completed in each property to meet the December 2020 deadline. The majority of this work has now been procured except for some garden fencing and external property work. However, the Council now only has 26 months to complete all the necessary works, including commissioning any outstanding works. The Council cannot risk there being any delays in completing the programme. It needs to ensure there is robust procurement and contract management in place to do this.
- Financial assumptions and budgets are contained in the HRA business plan.
- Kitchens, bathrooms and ancillary work will be undertaken in 6,330 dwellings between 2018 and December 2020. The WHQS is scheduled and planned to be achieved by December 2020.
- All void empty properties are bought up to the WHQS prior to re-letting unless they are soon to be completed within the primary WHQS capital programme. However, the Council recognises this has impacted upon the length of time taken to re-let void properties, and it needs to consider how it can improve this.
- An effective gas servicing regime to meet statutory landlord responsibilities is in place.
- Additional fire safety measures have been, or are programmed to be, installed in high rise blocks. This includes sprinkler systems, additional fire doors and awareness raising in conjunction with Mid and West Wales Fire and Rescue Service.
- A back-fill programme plan is in place for those properties where tenants have initially refused WHQS work, or where access is difficult or not convenient.
- The Council has worked effectively with its leaseholders to ensure that work is not held up. The Council has provided loans and financial support to those leaseholders unable to pay for work to communal areas of buildings.

## More timely reporting and monitoring of the Council's progress in meeting the WHQS is necessary to ensure it meets the standard by December 2020, and that tenants are aware of the progress being made

12 In reaching this conclusion we found that:

- The Council has reported and updated public information on progress against the WHQS in a limited way. For example, there has been a lack of information reported on the numbers and reasons for acceptable fails, and what category they fall into under WHQS guidance. The WHQS performance figures released by Welsh Government show that as of March 2018, the Council has 9,920 homes subject to acceptable fails. This equates to 73% of the Council's housing stock. It is, therefore, important that the Council reports the reasons for these acceptable fails. This will enable the Council to determine what future actions it can take to make those homes currently classed as acceptable fails into homes fully compliant with the WHQS. For example, those homes which are currently deemed as acceptable fails due to current tenant choice.
- Our telephone survey of a sample of Council tenants found that there was limited awareness of the WHQS programme among tenants. 24% of respondents confirmed that they had been contacted by the Council about WHQS and 66% said they had not been contacted. For those who have had improvement works, there seems to have been a lack of communication about the reasons for the planned works. Around half of respondents (48%) recall that the Council explained why the improvement works were needed but 43% had not been told.
- The Council's Overview and Scrutiny Committee established a WHQS Scrutiny Working Group, and undertook a review of WHQS in March 2016. However, there has been little scrutiny of this major Council programme since that time. There has been limited reporting on the WHQS to the Council's performance panels. Given that the Council must achieve the WHQS by December 2020, it is important that there is robust monitoring and challenge of progress, but we found limited evidence that this was happening.

## Most tenants we spoke to are satisfied with the quality of improvement works done to their homes by the Council, and with the housing service they receive

- 76% of respondents to our telephone survey confirmed that the WHQS improvement works were completed on time.
- 76% of respondents confirmed that they were satisfied with the quality of improvements, and 14% were dissatisfied.

- A significant majority of tenants are satisfied with the condition of the kitchens, bathrooms and outside of their homes. 73% are satisfied with their kitchen, 74% satisfied with their bathroom, and 69% satisfied with the outside of their home.
- 83% of respondents are satisfied with their neighbourhood as a place to live.
- 80% of respondents are satisfied with the housing service they receive from the Council, highlighting a good base to work from to make any further future improvements. Around one in ten are unsure (11%) or dissatisfied (9%) with the service received from the Council.
- The Council has done significant work to improve health, safety and security of those people living in high rise blocks of flats.
- District Housing Managers draw up lists of bids for environmental improvements on estates in conjunction with tenants, for example, to identify areas that require additional play facilities. The Council has provided financial support to pay for these programmes of improvement on a regular basis.
- About one in three tenants we spoke to as part of our telephone survey reported concerns with heating systems and damp in their homes. Of the 680 respondents, 30% find it difficult to heat their home during winter. 45% of respondents were concerned about the lack of, or poor, draught proofing. 34% of respondents reported damp, with the most visible signs being mould and wet patches.

## Most tenants we spoke to felt that the Council takes their views into consideration, but the Council could strengthen tenant engagement and make sure tenants are clear about why improvement works are needed

13 In reaching this conclusion we found that:

- The Council has a range of ways in which it engages with its tenants:
  - The use of Tenant Liaison Officers to give an interface between the Council, contractors and the individual tenant generally works well.
  - Follow up visits by the Council's technical staff are made to tenants at the completion of improvement works, but further checking of any snagging items or defects is required to ensure that all work is completed to tenants' satisfaction. Concerns about this aspect of improvement works has been identified in the Council's tenants' satisfaction survey results and was expressed by Tenants at our focus groups.
  - the Council's 'Open House' magazine provides a range of information about tenant related issues and helpful hints and guidance.

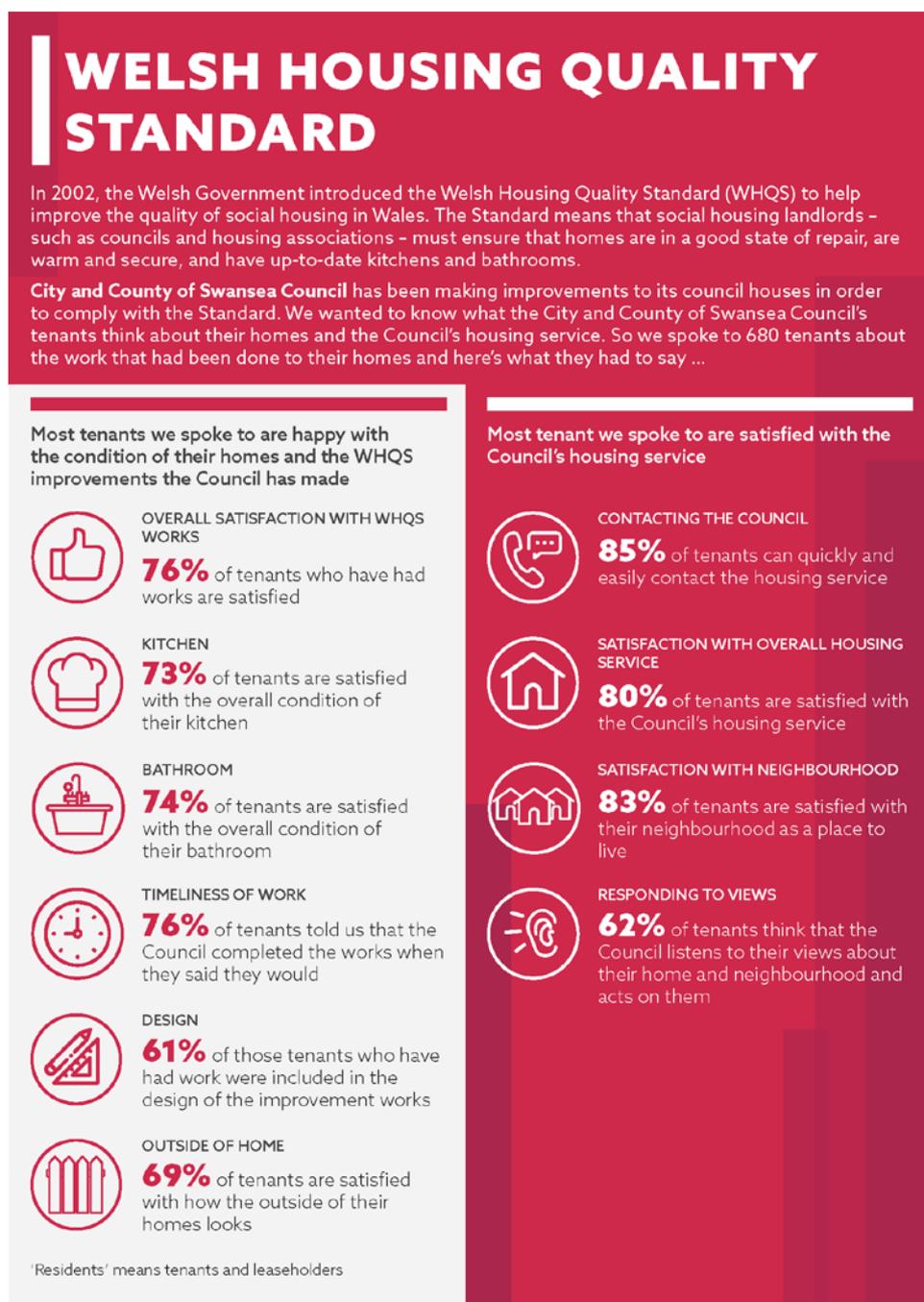
- The Council has undertaken Tenant Satisfaction surveys on a regular basis which gives the Council sufficient information about the areas where tenants believe that improvement to services should occur.
- The Council did a tenant satisfaction survey in 2017. 2,618 tenants responded to this survey. The survey found that 80% of tenants who responded were satisfied with the condition of their home, while 20% were dissatisfied. Of the 2,618 respondents, 40% had not seen an improvement to their house or estate. Of those tenants who had received improvements to the inside of their homes, approximately 22% were not satisfied with the end result. The Council should consider how it can address tenants' concerns, particularly as the bulk of the WHQS work (kitchens and bathrooms) is now being done within tenants' homes.
- The Council has not systematically analysed the reasons and factors contributing to the concerns of its' tenants, expressed through the Council's own tenant satisfaction survey, about the quality and timeliness of work carried out by contractors.
- Whilst the Council has a Tenant Participation Strategy covering the period 2015-18, it is limited in scope and information, including how resources will be used to support priorities. The Council has indicated that a new strategy will be produced during 2018, and this will be an opportunity to extend the ways on which it consults, engages and involves tenants.
- Our telephone survey found that:
  - 61% of respondents said that the Council included them in the design or specification of any improvement works, but 35% said they were not.
  - 85% of tenants we spoke to as part of our telephone survey said that they can quickly and easily contact the Council at a time that is convenient to them.
  - 62% of tenants we spoke to are satisfied the Council takes their views into consideration, and listens and acts upon them, although 21% are unsure. The remainder are dissatisfied (17%) suggesting there is work to do on engagement.
- The findings from our focus groups with a small number of BME tenants also suggested that the Council needs to consider how it can improve its engagement with tenants whose first language is not English or Welsh.
- Disruption payments are made to many tenants who are receiving work to their homes. In 2017-18 payments totalling £443,250 were made to 2,571 households. However, it was evident from our focus groups with tenants that there was some confusion about these disruption payments.

- The arrangements and approval for disruption payments should be revisited by the Council, and information provided to tenants should be made clearer on the subject. It was evident from our focus groups with tenants that there was some confusion about these disruption payments.

# Appendix 1

## Infographic summarising the key findings from our telephone survey

Exhibit 1: infographic summarising the key findings from our telephone survey with a sample of the Council's housing tenants



Most tenants we spoke to find their homes warm enough in winter but some told us they had problems with damp



#### HEATING

**70%** of tenants do not find it difficult to heat their homes in the winter



#### DAMP

**34%** of tenants we spoke to said they have damp in some parts of their homes. In most cases, tenants identified the damp through visible mould and had reported the problem to the Council



#### INFORMATION

**24%** of tenants told us that the Council has told them about WHQS



#### EXPLAINING THE NEED FOR THE WORKS

**48%** of tenants who have had works told us that the Council explained why the improvement works were needed



#### NEXT TWO YEARS

**38%** of tenants we spoke know if the Council will be making any improvements to their homes in the next 2 years, 39% told us they didn't know and 23% didn't know/couldn't remember



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The telephone interviews for **City and County of Swansea Council** ran from **24th April** until **9th May** 2018.

The Auditor General requested a sample of around 5% of all of the Council's tenants and leaseholders. The sample of **680** respondents was divided between tenants and leaseholders based on the WHQS compliance status of the **9,072** (general needs and sheltered housing) and **501** leaseholder properties that the Council provided. Properties can be fully compliant, non-compliant or acceptable fails. The sample also reflects the WHQS status of properties across the area based on the data provided by the Council. **639** tenants and **41** leaseholders responded to the survey.



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