

COMMUNITY, HOUSING & ASSETS OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Date of Meeting	Wednesday, 16 th June 2021
Report Subject	Welsh Housing Quality Standard (WHQS) External Works
Cabinet Member	Cabinet Member for Housing
Report Author	Chief Officer (Housing and Assets)
Type of Report	Operational

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The purpose of this report is to provide an update on the delivery of the Welsh Housing Quality Standard (WHQS) the Council is delivering through its Capital Investment Programme.

This report focuses on the external work elements of the programme along with achievements to date and maintaining the standard moving forwards.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1	Scrutiny support the Capital Investment Programme in its final year of major investment and as the Council enters into the maintenance phase of the Welsh Housing Quality Standards.
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REPORT DETAILS

1.00	EXPLAINING THE WELSH HOUSING QUALITY STANDARD EXTERNAL WORKS PROGRAMME
1.01	<p>The Welsh Housing Quality Standard (WHQS) is a national quality standard for public sector homes in Wales as set out by the Welsh Government.</p> <p>All tenants in Wales should have the opportunity to live in good quality homes which meet the requirements of each household. The Housing Capital Works Team is responsible for delivering Internal & External upgrades to all Council owned properties and for compliance with the WHQS.</p>
1.02	<p>At the commencement of the WHQS programme the Capital Works Team were tasked with delivering a major investment programme covering a number of years to upgrade its housing, including its external areas</p>
1.03	<p>Following the tenant consultation in 2014 and member workshops, it was agreed that following tenant feedback a logical approach to property refurbishment would be taken and that all internal works should be prioritised first followed by envelope works (roofing, windows and doors) and finally external works (fencing, paths and gardens). In addition there is also an environmental works programme that targets communal based regeneration and car parking etc.</p> <p>As noted above the Council prioritised the internal and envelope works at the beginning of the WHQS programme and as a result these works are nearing full compliancy. There will be a percentage of Council properties that have not yet had any roofing works completed and this is due to the property component (window, door etc.) not scheduled for replacement until post WHQS compliance. As the Council moves into the maintenance phase of the WHQS, those roofs or components will be replaced and scheduled accordingly.</p> <p>As a result of completing the internal and envelope works the focus has now moved on to external works (fencing, paths and gardens). We are planning our work programmes to properties based upon our stock condition surveys where we have either identified a health and safety risk, unusable garden area (due to the topography) or external storage issues.</p>
1.04	<p>The Fencing and Garden improvement programme that commenced in 2015 has been developed into a more extensive programme now that the majority of internal and envelope works have been completed to reach WHQS compliance, available resources will be redirected to this work area.</p> <p>The programme will focus mainly on the property boundaries ensuring they are safe, secure, and suitable and in line with the Council's agreed specification/requirements. Also included within the programme will be paths, gardens and storage allocation.</p>

The below will also be considered when completing the programme and will depend each scheme and area:

- Depending on the property type and location, whether it be general needs, sheltered or a communal/ open plan areas, what type and specification of boundary is considered suitable (hedgerow, garden walls, fencing etc.), detailing the height etc. and what should be removed, repaired or renewed. Future maintenance costs and in the context of hedges impacts on garden wildlife must also be considered when removing hedgerow and replacing with timber fencing that requires future maintenance and renewal.
- The Council's plans for programmed replacement and refurbishment
- The Council's expectations for gardens, paths, paved areas and gates etc.
- The Council's approach to natural boundaries; i.e. Hedgerows etc.
- The Council's approach to 'open plan' gardens and fencing
- Storage for general needs and sheltered properties for garden equipment, bicycles etc. or mobility scooters.

Flintshire County Council are continuing programmes of work to encompass all the components required to achieve and maintain the Welsh Housing Quality Standard (WHQS).

In terms of the WHQS and external areas it asks for the following areas to be considered;

Safe and secure

- All opportunities must be taken to make gardens safe and suitable for young children to play in, easy to maintain and reasonably private.

Located in attractive and safe environments

- Is there soft and hard landscaping with planting in protected areas?
- Is there adequate and safe play space for young children?
- Are dwellings clearly identifiable with definable boundaries?

1.05

The Council is committed to maintaining boundaries to its properties to meet the WHQS standard on an ongoing basis. This includes repair, replacement and maintenance of existing boundaries in whichever form they take, including, but not limited to:

- Concrete Post/Timber panel
- Hit/Miss or Close Boarding
- Natural Boundaries (Hedges, Bushes etc.) (Maintain only – Not replacement)
- Brick Walls
- Garden Rail/kick rail

The Council's preferred option of fencing is close boarded timber fencing and double sided hit and miss timber fencing as a result of tenant and tenant federation feedback as this has relatively low maintenance and replacement costs etc. Wherever possible and this will be the choice whenever replacement is needed (if feasible).

If, on inspection, existing fencing is in good condition, it will not be replaced. The Council will not replace components that still have an adequate component replacement life remaining. However, if it is beyond economical repair or does not deliver sufficient security or privacy, they will be considered for replacement.

As hedges and shrubberies etc. are the responsibility of the tenant to maintain, any excessive works, due to overgrown/neglected natural boundaries may be recharged back to the tenant in compliance with the Tenant Policy and Recharge Policy.

The Council will install and/or renew front, side & rear gates in any replacement/programme where required. Gates to the front will normally be powder coated metal; gates to the side/rear will be timber in line with existing heights. Both will take into consideration, Lifetime Homes etc. in terms of openings.

Fencing in sheltered schemes will be approached in a different way. Emphasis will be on security but without creating an 'institutionalised' effect for tenants; the favoured fencing height will be maintained at 1200mm; however, side elevations and side gates will be 1800mm if required/feasible to ensure access to the side and rear of these properties is secure.

However, as all schemes differ slightly, consultation with the relevant authorities/carers will be completed if this standard is to deviate in any way so as to ensure the comfort and security of vulnerable tenants is not compromised.

The Council has numerous sites where an open plan arrangement is in place from the design stage of construction. This can be due to various reasons, but in certain areas, there may be a call for this restriction to be waived due to the original sizes of the properties and the lack of storage space our tenants have access to.

Any structures that have been erected on Open Plan areas of land without permission from the Landlord (in this case the Housing Assets Team) or from the Planning Department, will require removal and the area reinstated to its original condition.

Due to our properties now having sensitive equipment in the loft/attic space such as Solar Photovoltaic power supplies, meters, ventilation systems (Positive Input Ventilation) and boiler flues; it is proposed that these areas are restricted not only for tenant safety but due to the fact that these areas are not boarded for storage purposes and the Council does not provide access ladders.

	<p>As a result, the Council will be providing external storage depending on the type of property and only if permitted under planning regulations and permitted development etc. Tenants should have access to reasonable storage and depending on the size of the garden, layout and also the number of bedrooms within the property; then a suitable sized timber shed for storage purposes only will be provided.</p> <p>As a Council there is no legal obligation to provide storage for mobility scooters, however, the Council recognises that this is something our tenants in sheltered accommodation quite often request.</p> <p>We have already started providing scooter storage and charging points to some of our sheltered housing complexes, however, this requires a robust management regime to be in place due to the potential fire risks.</p> <p>Moving forwards, all properties and sheltered complexes will be individually assessed. Where there is existing storage such as brick built outbuildings etc., the Council will, where feasible, repair. Where these structures are beyond repair and in dangerous condition they will be replaced with timber storage solutions.</p>
1.06	<p>The Capital Works Team have also continued with the good work delivered through its Environmental Works programme which includes communal and individual car parking solutions and regeneration works to communal footpaths and garage areas.</p> <p>All works are prioritised through our Scrutiny approved matrix and any feasible projects are tendered and progressed accordingly.</p> <p>More recently we have included communal lighting solutions and CCTV initiatives into these projects focusing on our sheltered properties initially and communal shared garden areas. We have also liaised with our colleagues in the Estate Management Team addressing anti-social behaviour concerns and ensuring any priority areas are included within our Capital Programme.</p> <p>We have also incorporated the renewal communal pathways and communal fencing/boundaries. This ensures that our communal areas that are utilised by our tenants, are attractive and safe (Part 6 of the WHQS, Section 7) 'Located in attractive and safe environments'.</p> <p>It is important that our tenants feel safe in their homes but also when they are accessing communal areas that are usually in the immediate vicinity of their homes.</p> <p>We are confident that this programme will bring further benefits to our tenants whilst regenerating these areas, continuing to provide accessible parking solutions close to our tenants homes (where possible) alleviating congestion and ensuring ease of access for emergency services.</p>
1.07	<p>It is estimated that the Council will deliver approximately £880,000 of External and Environmental works this financial year.</p>

2.00	RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS
2.01	<p>Workforce - There are always concerns that workforce retention may be difficult to maintain. Given that the Construction Industry is an ever changing sector, the workforce may seek opportunities elsewhere i.e. New Build, Private Sector etc.</p> <p>The Capital Works Team has made adjustments to the team's structure to incorporate a degree resilience and robustness to the delivery model.</p>
2.02	<p>Budgets - When creating our delivery programme, budget estimates were made for the required upgrade works to our existing properties with contingency sums included for unforeseen work such as Structural Repairs etc.</p>
2.03	<p>Procurement – Procuring the various WHQS works can be challenging. The Council must ensure that all contracts are measured not only by cost but by quality. Quality forms an important part of the assessment process where the Capital Works Team interviews all its Contractors and assesses Quality Submission Papers before any contracts are awarded. The team have been able to secure further efficiencies by merging some contracts so that internal and external resources can be shared.</p> <p>There is a risk that many Contractors are opting for New Build contracts rather than Refurbishment contracts. Engaging with our supply chain early on and sharing our Capital Investment Programme aspirations with our Contract Framework Partners assists us to procure longer term contracts and therefore reduces risk of inflated costs based on long term contract arrangements.</p>

3.00	IMPACT ASSESSMENT AND RISK MANAGEMENT
3.01	<p>Failure to maintain WHQS would be damaging to the Council's reputation. This scheme will ensure that the maximum number of properties maintain this standard – reducing the number of costly reactive repairs and potential disrepair claims.</p>

4.00	CONSULTATIONS REQUIRED/CARRIED OUT
4.01	<p>Prior to the Capital Investment Programme commencing, the team held Member Workshops in 2014 where the majority of Members attended and were actively involved in the design and delivery of the current Capital Programme.</p> <p>We also held Tenant Federation Workshops where we engaged with the federation with regards to what priority and which order the works should be completed along with discussing the potential to merge certain work streams, i.e. Internal Works were prioritised first with both the Kitchen and Bathroom Upgrade works merging into one work stream.</p>

	<p>We also held Tenant Consultation Workshops in our Connects Centres and community centres engaging with our tenants and discussing the Capital Programme along with ascertaining what order tenants would prefer to have components of their home upgraded first.</p> <p>We also sent over 7,200 Tenant Questionnaires asking for feedback and comments on the proposed Capital Programme and initially completed circa 50 interviews with Contractors utilising Tenants & Volunteers. This has increased year on year when new contracts are awarded.</p> <p>Moving forwards and as part of the next phase of the Capital Programme and retrofit programme the Capital Works Team will again be consulting with Members, tenants and tenant groups to ensure that each is engaged with and to ensure their preferences and concerns with regards to this next phase are considered and implemented as we have previously.</p>
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5.00	APPENDICES
5.01	Appendix 1 - WHQS Delivery District Areas Appendix 2 - Appendix C Capital Programme- 21.22 (Budget)

6.00	LIST OF ACCESSIBLE BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS
6.01	https://www.flintshire.gov.uk/en/Resident/Housing/Welsh-Housing-Quality-Standard-WHQS.aspx
6.02	https://gov.wales/decarbonisation-homes-wales-advisory-group#content

7.00	CONTACT OFFICER DETAILS
7.01	Contact Officer: Sean O'Donnell, Capital Works Manager Telephone: 01352 701642 E-mail: Sean.O'Donnell@flintshire.gov.uk

8.00	GLOSSARY OF TERMS
8.01	<p>Capital Programme: The Council's financial plan covering capital schemes and expenditure proposals for the current year and a number of future years. It also includes estimates of the capital resources available to finance the programme.</p> <p>The Welsh Housing Quality Standard (WHQS): is a national standard of quality for homes. This is set by the Welsh Government. It means that all tenants in Wales should have the opportunity to live in good quality homes which meet the requirements of that household.</p>

Acceptable Fail: Welsh Government understand that some homes cannot receive the WHQS works due to 4 reasons, listed below:

1. Works are physically impossible carry out,
2. It is not cost effective to do the works,
3. Timing (works due in near future already)
4. Tenant refuses the improvements.

These are called 'Acceptable Fails' and the Welsh Government will accept that 20% of our properties will be in this group.

Financial Year: the period of 12 months commencing on 1 April

Budget: a statement expressing the Council's policies and service levels in financial terms for a particular financial year. In its broadest sense it includes both the revenue budget and capital programme and any authorised amendments to them.

Contract Framework: A Contract Framework is an agreement between one or more contracting authorities and one or more economic operators. These frameworks have Contractors, Consultants and Suppliers that have been successful in joining the specific work categories. The Council often uses these frameworks to procure works that have already gone through a tender process in line with OJEU and can be utilised to procure works or services.

They are often the most economic advantage in terms of value for money and local training provision.

HRA: The Housing Revenue Account

Components: A part or element such as an assets amenities (Kitchen Bathroom, Boiler, Roof, Windows, Doors etc.).

CCTV: Closed Circuit Television, a security camera used for recording and monitoring activity in line with the Council policies.