



Warrington Housing Association Scrutiny Panel Service Review – Application Form and Process

Findings and recommendation report

Review Completion Timetable	
Date of report WHASP sign off	June 2018
Date of report to SMT	August 2018
Date of return to WHASP	
Date of WHASP review of completion	

Warrington Housing Association Scrutiny Panel report on Application Form and Process

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Related documents:	Application Form – General Needs Application Form – Retirement Scheme Application Form – Transfer Applying for a Home leaflet Customer Services Charter Retirement Living Leaflet Your Guide to Transfers Where We Have Properties Housing Management Action Plan of improvements Housing Management Journey Map – Incoming Application Process Housing Process Improvement Log Housing Applications (Customer Service Team) Logging a New Application Process Process – Logging a transfer request Process - transfers

Abbreviations used

WHA – Warrington Housing Association
 WHASP – Warrington Housing Association Scrutiny Panel
 HA – Housing Assistant
 SP – Scrutiny Panel
 SMT – Senior Management Team
 CSA – Customer Support Assistant
 VFM – Value for Money

Introduction

Warrington Housing Association Scrutiny Panel (WHASP) has been developed with tenants and WHA staff, in response to the challenges of service and performance improvement, without regulatory compulsion or inspection.

WHASP, with the assistance of WHA's Community Development Officer, has identified a programme of scrutiny, with the Application Form and Process Review being the ten in their programme. 8 members of WHASP have spent 92 hours carrying out this review.

By working together we are aiming to provide services which are fit for purpose, objective and customer focused. The Scrutiny Panel feel that their main the aim is to give residents more choice and to provide the best possible, cost effective service.

Business Case

Within the last 2 years WHA staff have reviewed the application forms and the processes used for application submissions, making relevant changes and improvements to the policies and procedures used. This review will ensure that policies and procedures are being followed and that customers have a good experience when applying to WHA for a property. This review will only look at the Application Form and the initial processes used during the application.

The key questions that the panel chose in relation to this review were:

- Can the application form be provided in other formats? I.E. Enlarged text, other languages, Braille. However would these different formats be expensive (Consider VFM).
- Is application form easy to understand via the paper version and online?
- Do you get an automated email when you complete an application online?
- Do you receive an acknowledgment letter to say that your application has been received?
- Are tenants made aware of the size of property (i.e. 1 bed) in relation to the area they may want to live in?
- Is the correct information being sent to prospective tenants in regards to the different applications?
- Is support given to tenants and applicants (particularly elderly tenants and applicants) who apply for an internal transfer application?

The expected outcomes for this review are:

- To ensure that the application process is fair and equal for all applicants. Ensuring that the applications are accessible and understandable to all.
- To ensure that the application process is understandable to older tenants and that support is given if required to complete forms.

Scope of the review – What we reviewed

The Scrutiny panel conducted this review by:

- Scrutinising the current WHA General Needs Application Form, Transfer Form and Retirement Scheme Application Form to ensure that the questions are relevant and understandable to applicants.
- Reviewing the existing Applying for a Home Leaflet, Customer Services Charter, Retirement Living leaflet and Your Guide to Transfers given to prospective applicants to ensure that all information is provided is correct with the relevant time scales. Also to ensure that the information, language and terminology used is understandable and clear to applicants.
- Reviewing the Journey Map, Action Plan for improvements and Improvement Log created by the WHA Customer Service Group to ensure that all stages and processes are relevant and as time effective for applicants as possible.
- Looking at the processes used to log a new application and a transfer request and how this is done by staff members.
- Looking at the number of general needs, retirement scheme and transfer applications WHA have received in the last 12 months.
- Reviewing tenant satisfaction from the New Residents Surveys from the last 12 months to ensure that new residents were happy with the application process.
- Surveyed a small number of very new tenants who have recently completed the application process. Ask further details in regards to the Application Form and Process to gauge satisfaction.
- Bench marked WHA's Application form and process against other Housing Associations (South Liverpool Housing and Alpha) to gauge ease and effectiveness of application.
- Interviewed staff members Rachel Flexen (previously of the Customer Support team) and Liz Corbett (previously a Housing Assistant) to get their insight into their involvement in the Application Form and Process.

Value for Money

Despite monetary cost not really being involved in this review, value for money can be demonstrated through the use of staff time, as well as printing and postage costs.

To demonstrate value for money, applicants are directed to apply on line when possible. This means that WHA does not have to send a printed paper application form in the post saving money on both printing and postage. However if the application form is completed on line it still needs to be printed in the office and stored as a paper based version, which does not provide value for money in regards to printing costs. Once a new computer system is implemented, online applications should be able to stay 'on line' meaning a reduction in printing and filing which will increase VFM.

On line potential applicants can access the application form and all relevant documentation needed. They can download this to their own devices or choose to print it if possible. As all the documentation is online this prevents potential applicants contacting WHA to ask for further information to be sent to them, providing value for money as this reduces printed and postage costs and staff time.

The application form can be provided in other formats, such as Braille or different languages. This cannot be provided instantaneously as they have to be ordered at a cost. However over the last 10 years this has never been requested. For a number of years WHA had a company called Language Line on a retainer and they would produce any documents in another language or translate if verbal communication was poor. This retainer was cancelled a couple of years ago due to lack of use, saving the Association money. If an applicant requested an enlarged version or audio descriptive version this is something that would be produced in house providing value for money.

Brief overview of findings – What is working well?

During this review the panel found a number of areas of the application form and process working effectively and efficiently.

The panel found that the WHA application form is easy to access on line for prospective applicants, compared to other housing associations. Some application forms were difficult to locate on the website and for some you could not download an application form or pack as they had other methods of applying such as a telephone interview first.

From studying the application forms and also from feedback from new tenants who have completed the forms, they found them simple and understandable to complete. The questions were not too complicated and applicants felt they were relevant.

Applicants are acknowledged with an email or letter sent to them giving them reassurance that their form has been received. When they receive this initial letter it gives them a reference number that they can use at any point to contact WHA and discuss the application form. They are informed that they can contact WHA at any point throughout the Application Process and the panel found that staff members can be contacted easily and they will endeavour to assist you. This is very positive because in some housing associations it can be very difficult to contact staff members to talk to them either over the phone or face to face.

On line all relevant documents in relation to the application form are easily accessible. They are highlighted in red so it is clear what needs to be read in relation to the application form. It also gives information in regards to 'Your guide to why your application for housing has been rejected' so that this is explained clearly. When applying using a paper based form, all relevant documentation such as 'Where we have properties' and 'Applying for a Home' leaflet are sent as part of an application pack given the applicant all information together, reducing the need to contact WHA to ask further questions.

Improvements and Recommendations

These are the detailed findings and recommendations made by the Scrutiny Panel as a result of the information given and research carried out during the review of the Application Form and Process. The following are recommendations that the Scrutiny Panel would like to be considered as they believe it will improve the Application Form and Process.

1. Clarification of property size and area on the application form.

There is no detail on the application form to show the size of property in a specific area. Information on property sizes are provided on a separate sheet 'Our Homes', however staff have made us aware that applicants will apply for properties in areas where their preferred size or type of property is not available (for example 3 or 4 bed homes in Latchford). Staff will then have to contact applicants to make them aware of suitable properties in relevant areas.

The recommendation is if the size of properties were added to the list of areas on the application form this should increase VFM as it will decrease staff time in explaining to applicants that they cannot live in certain areas.

For example:

- Great Sankey/Hood Manor - 2, 3 and 4 bed houses, 1 bed retirement apartments and bungalows
- Lingley Green (Cronulla Drive) – 2 and 3 bed houses and 1 bed bungalows

2. Some changes to the general needs application form to streamline and make it easier for applicants to complete, while also providing evidence for the CSA's so they do not always have to chase information.

Examples from the General Needs Application form include:

- Maternity certificate to prove pregnancy (if stated on the form this will prevent CSA's having to confirm at a later stage)
- More clarification on the people living with you (different boxes to list adults and children – specifically gender and age as this determines size of property given)
- More space is given for the 'Further Information' section as applicants often need to give more detail.

The recommendation is that these changes are made to the application form as this will provide the CSA's with more information, potentially reducing the time they would need to contact applicants to ask for further information and clarification of their forms.

3. Clarification whether sharing bedrooms age is 15 or 16 years old.

In the 'Applying for a Home' leaflet it states that children can be up to 15 years in regards to the same gender sharing a bedroom. Yet in the 'Your guide to Transfers' it states that children can be up to the age of 16 years.

The recommendation is that a decision needs to be made as to whether it is 15 or 16 years and the correct information needs to be put into all documents so that it is consistent.

4. Clarification over phrases used such as 'retiring age' and 'retirement'.

In the 'Our Homes' leaflet under 'Limetree Avenue' it states that 'apartments for people above or approaching retiring age'. In the 'Retirement Living' leaflet it refers to retirement age as 55 plus or 60 plus. However retirement age now varies for everybody due to differences in government pension ages for both male and females and professional retirement age can also differ. Therefore should this terminology continue to be used?

The recommendation is that rather than using the term 'retiring age' a specific age/number should be given to provide clarity as in the 'Retirement Living' leaflet.

5. The 'Retirement Living' leaflet that is sent out with the retirement application form needs to be reviewed as information is no longer valid.

Different parts of the information provided on the leaflet have changed over the last 12 months, meaning that prospective applicants are not been given up to date information. For example:

- Lowry Close no longer has a full time scheme manager but it does have a part time independent living coordinator.
- Lyon Court no longer has an active hairdressing salon.
- Limetree Avenue does not have any specific design features for those over 55 on the 1st or 2nd floors.

Members of the Scrutiny Panel current live or attend the different retirement schemes to provide the evidence and they feel the leaflet should be consistent with current living arrangements in the properties. The recommendation is that the leaflet is updated for prospective applicants and residents.

6. Ensuring the different documentation has the same information in regards to time scales.

In the 'Customer Services Charter' leaflet it says you will be contacted within 5 working days yet in the 'Applying for a Home' leaflet it says you will be contacted within 10 working days.

The recommendation is the time scales need to be agreed and be the same on both documents.

7. Not achieving timescales detailed in documentation due to confusion and lack of staff awareness.

The applicant survey completed by new tenant's details that they did not have confirmation of banding within six weeks or confirmation of application form within one week, despite different time scales being given on leaflets. Customer service staff are also unsure of the time scales for applicants in regards to acceptance and banding for a property.

The recommendation is clarification needs to be provided to both staff and applicants in regards to how long it will take to receive confirmation of the application and then acceptance onto the waiting list and the banding given. Clarification for applicants needs to be provided in the 'Applying for a Home' leaflet, so that applicants know how long they should be waiting for responses.

8. Clarification of acknowledgement letter.

When a new applicant receives a letter/email to say that their application has been received this is not confirmation that they are on the Waiting list for a property. This only happens once a second letter has been received to detail an applicant's banding on the waiting list or rejection.

The recommendation is that the initial letter sent to an applicant needs to clearly detail that this is only an acknowledgement of application and NOT a confirmation of acceptance onto the waiting list. In this letter a time scale needs to be given to the applicant to show how long they will wait in regards to acceptance or rejection onto the waiting list.

9. Create an initial telephone assessment system, before a detailed paper or online application is completed.

Alpha housing use a telephone interview system where basic questions are asked to establish the applicant's needs. For example, area to live in, size of property, number of people to live in the property. This initial interview allows the staff to inform the applicant if any properties are available and of the waiting list times, meaning the applicant can then decide if they want to apply to the Association.

The recommendation to create a telephone based assessment system should reduce the number of paper based applications, and the number of applicants of the waiting lists for a long period of time. Thus reducing the time spent by CSA's contacting applicants that are no longer suitable for properties, or having applicants contact WHA to readdress or deal with their application.

Conclusion

The Scrutiny panel have reached a number of number of positive findings in regards to the Application Form and Process, and overall the review has found that the expected outcomes proposed at the initial scoping stages are implemented. The review has shown that:

- The application process is fair and equal for all applicants as all feedback from tenants has shown that they found the application form easy to understand, allowing them to provide the information requested. Application forms are also available in other formats (different languages, enlarged text, audio described) so that anyone can access the form and apply.
- Staff will provide support to any applicant (whether it be a new applicant for general needs or retirement or an internal transfer) to assist them to complete forms if needed and fully understand the different stages of the application process.
- The information provided to the applicant is suitable and understandable allowing the applicant to complete the form without having to ask too many questions.

The panel have created a number of recommendations to present to the SMT. Some are quite minor, however will improve and provide clarity on documentation sent out, which may aid the process. Some of the recommendations are larger and the Scrutiny panel understand that these may take time to implement if they are accepted.

The Scrutiny panel would like this report to be submitted to Senior Management Team for approval and an action plan to be created from the recommendations given.