

Tenant Question Time - Repairs

What is a Tenant Question Time event (TQT)?

This event forms part of a series of TQT events organised by the Gateway Membership Team (GMT).

TQTs give tenants the opportunity to ask a panel of specialist staff questions on a specific topic. The session is usually facilitated by an Independent Tenant Advisor, Tim Morton.

The next TQT takes place on **Wednesday 6th March 2019** at Watford Community Housing, 59 Clarendon Road. The GMT welcomes ideas from tenants for future events, which you can submit by emailing gmt@wcht.org.uk.

The panel:

Stuart Thompson – Head of Repairs and Maintenance

Julia Watts – Repairs Manager

Debbie Casey – Customer Experience Manager

Independent facilitator - Gill Hutchinson, standing in for Tim Morton

The panel introduced themselves and explained that the repairs and gas service all come under the remit of the Head of Repairs and Maintenance. These services are delivered by our in-house team.

Q. Can I move a plug socket from one location to another?

Yes, although tenants would need to put in an Application for Alteration request to Watford Community Housing to do this. Safety is extremely important where plug sockets are concerned. If plug sockets are physically damaged or aren't working, these should be reported to Watford Community Housing, who will arrange a repair.

Q. What repairs do tenants have to pay for?

If the repair has arisen from fair wear and tear then Watford Community Housing would make the repair. There is a limited budget for repairs, so if damage is caused by tenant or a person visiting your property, the cost would be the tenant's responsibility. The main principles that govern the decision are that if it concerns fixtures and fittings, i.e. it is something that would still be in the property when you move out, this would be covered by our repairs team.

23rd January 2019

Q. What about blocked drains?

It depends what it has been blocked by. If the drain has been blocked by misuse then there would be a charge applied. A blocked toilet is typically repaired within 24 hours, but this depends on whether or not there are one or two toilets at the property.

Q. My double glazing was fitted 5 years ago and now the windows are blown, can I ask Watford Community Housing to look at it?

Yes, please report to Watford Community Housing. When a seal breaks down on a double glazed unit we have a specialist contractor that will come and visit, applying a special treatment that clears the condensation between the two glass panes. Due to the cost of this work, the treatment would only be applied if the window was at least 50% covered by condensation between the panes.

Q. What happens if it gets to 4pm and the job isn't finished, is the operative expected to leave?

Staff in the Gateway Repair Team work from 8am-4:30pm but this depends on the nature of the job. If the tenant is vulnerable, and the repair is urgent or high risk the operative should ensure that the job is left in an appropriate manner.

Q. Can guttering be repaired without the tenant being home?

It depends whether or not there is an access issue. If access to the gutters is possible without needing to be let in, then this would be possible.

Q. Why can my guttering not be repaired sooner? Is it true that Watford Community Housing have to hire in the equipment to clean them out?

As responsive repairs, we don't have a planned maintenance schedule for gutter clearing. In the winter, we have much higher demand for roofing workers and this can lead to delays in appointments. Watford Community Housing have the equipment required to clean the gutters, but the cleaning equipment does not allow us to reach some of the higher blocks. Stuart explained that Watford Community Housing are going to be hiring another van so that the two team members skilled in roofing can split up to tackle some of the smaller jobs. This means that they will still be working safely in pairs, but that we have more resource to deal with the demand by doubling the capacity. This would also involve using operatives that are trained to use the gutter cleaning equipment that are not roofers by trade. This extra manpower will be used to get on top of some of the more problematic gutter areas over the summer, when the demand for repairs is typically lower.

23rd January 2019

Some properties present both access and equipment issues, and this is a key factor in delay. Either needing to hire a cherry picker, and in some cases we would need to put scaffolding up.

Q. Why don't Watford Community Housing pay for a cherry picker? Or hire scaffolders/double up on roofers?

The amount that we would use it wouldn't justify the purchase of such expensive equipment. It is also the cost of maintaining the equipment that needs to be considered. This type of large purchase would be at the expense of other key areas of the repairs service. The audience suggested exploring the option of partnering with a local authority or housing association to reduce the costs and share the equipment.

Q. Do Watford Community Housing offer apprenticeships that cover more than one skill?

Yes, Watford Community Housing have multi-skilled apprentices and operatives who are able to cover a wide range of repairs. Multi-skilled team members are not qualified for gas and electric work, these repairs would only be carried out by specifically qualified operatives.

Q. Are roofs inspected?

Yes, through stock condition surveys and our roofing programme, which run on a five-year basis. Where there are high volumes of calls for roofing repairs, the planned team will target those properties in the planned maintenance.

Q. Why is there such a long delay for repairs?

Watford Community Housing have faced challenges over the last 12 months that have impacted our repairs service. The extreme cold weather last year created delays and in the last couple of months we have seen high sickness levels within the Gateway Repairs Team. Staff turnover and difficulty in recruitment also added to the challenge. However, the service is still averaging 10 calendar days for all repairs.

Q. Why are repairs cancelled at the last minute?

When we cancel a repair we should give tenants as much notice as possible. When this is caused by sickness or an emergency repair, this can mean that people will not have much notice at all. However, it is expected that staff inform residents as promptly as possible.

23rd January 2019

Q. How do we know that satisfaction levels and first-time fix scores are accurate?

This data comes directly from residents who are completing and returning feedback surveys. Surveys are sent to all residents receiving a repair. The Gateway Membership Team – which is made up of residents – reviews the performance of these figures.

Q. It sometimes feels that money is going into new builds and that the older properties are not kept up to standard. What are Watford Community Housing doing to combat this?

As the business grows, the repairs team needs to grow accordingly. Stuart emphasised that we are fulfilling our repairs duty. The ‘Beast from the East’ had a significant impact on the team, costing around £100,000. The business is supportive of the necessary growth within the team and are working with tenants in focus groups to look at how the service can be improved over the coming years.

Q. Why have services such as painting and fencing been cut?

The rent cut from government has been in place for the last three years and this has had a significant impact across the housing sector. Adjustments have had to be made in response and some services have had to be withdrawn.

Q. What are the arrangements for emergency repairs?

24/7 and 365 days-a-year service is offered by Orbis, but this is only for emergencies. We also have duty officers on a rota across the trades so that emergency repairs can be completed out of hours.

Q. Abbey View and Munden View seem to have their biggest issues over bank holidays and felt failed by the out of hours service in these instances. What is being done?

This occasion highlighted the fact that there were gaps in the out-of-hours service. The main issue was that staff weren't being made aware of serious issues rapidly enough by Orbis (who provide the cover). The Meriden Residents Association have been given direct contact details for staff, and staff have met with Orbis to improve the service. Debbie emphasised the importance of reporting the issue to Watford Community Housing directly in the first instance. Even if you think a neighbour might have already reported, it is better to ensure that an issue is reported twice rather than not at all.

Q. Have the operatives been advised to stop repairing properties at the Turnstones as they are due to be demolished?

There is no directive from Watford Community Housing to reduce the repairs in this area. Just this week a repair has been issued to replace a door at one of these properties. The audience and panel

23rd January 2019

discussed the importance of operatives always being respectful about the looming demolition when conducting repairs in these properties.

Q. Why do gas certificates take so long to be sent out?

Watford Community Housing take gas safety very seriously. An operative will come out and do the service, this is then checked with the gas team and the planning team, before being printed and sent to the property. The legal obligation is for it to be printed and sent within 30 days and so the delay in receiving the certificate should not exceed this. Stuart agreed to look into specific examples.

Q. I find it difficult to get appointment times around work. If I can't book time off work, are the only alternatives a Thursday evening or Saturday morning?

Yes, these are the alternative slots to weekday repairs. The audience member expressed concern that these evening and weekend appointments are not well-publicised. The panel explained that it has been advertised in publications to all tenants relating to repairs.

In response to the request to extend the offer of these evening and weekend repairs, Stuart explained that these slots had not been well utilised. On Saturday mornings, the percentage of tenants that were not at home for their scheduled repair, meaning that the operative could not get into the property to undertake the work, went up to 40%. The average for this is 10%.

Staff suggested that we could raise awareness of this through Voice magazine that is sent to all properties. Debbie also agreed to speak to customer service to remind them to promote these slots to people whilst on the phone.