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Welsh Housing Quality Standard review including Council housing tenants' perspective review – **Vale of Glamorgan 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, Richard Hayward, Gwilym Bury, Sara-Jane Byrne and Charlotte Owen, directed by Huw Rees.

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Summary report

- 1 In housing, as in many local government service areas, users have no choice of service provider or, where alternative providers exist, their choice is limited by cost or other reasons. In this situation, their ability to influence services to meet their needs relies on users having a 'voice' in service design.
- 2 It is especially important that service users can feed in their views, experiences and hopes as the Council decides which services to reduce, increase or change in the current environment where finances are under pressure. Taking account of the users' voice means redesigned services are more likely to meet people's needs and be better value for money.
- 3 The Welsh Government stresses the importance of developing a partnership with citizens. Involvement is one of the 'five ways of working' that local authorities are required to adopt by the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 (WFG Act). And in its Local Government White Paper (January 2017) the Welsh Government states:

'We want to develop a more equal partnership with citizens. The role of public services should be to support people to live independent lives and to seek to de-escalate demand, intervening only when necessary and only for as long as required. In doing so, the focus inevitably shifts to prevention and a public service that is able to put more effort into helping people to avoid crisis, rather than one which is focused on supporting people in crisis. This is about creating prudent public services for the future.'¹
- 4 In 2017-18, the Wales Audit Office completed work to understand the 'service user perspective' at every Council within Wales. We followed a broadly similar approach at each council, although we agreed the specific focus and approach to the work with each one individually. In Vale of Glamorgan Council (the Council), we reviewed the housing service. In particular, tenants' engagement with, and degree of choice experienced in, delivering the Welsh Housing Quality Standard (WHQS), and their view on the quality of the service they receive from the Council.
- 5 In 2001, the Welsh Government set out its long-term vision for housing in Wales entitled **Better Homes for People in Wales**. The WHQS is the Welsh Government standard of housing quality. The WHQS was first introduced in 2002 and aims to ensure that all dwellings are of good quality and suitable for the needs of existing and future residents. The Welsh Government set a target for all social landlords to improve their housing stock to meet the WHQS as soon as possible, but in any event by 2020. In 2011 the Council decided against transferring its housing stock following a tenant ballot that narrowly rejected stock transfer². Consequently, the Council retained its housing stock and role as landlord. It is one of 11 councils in

¹ Welsh Government, **White Paper Reforming Local Government: Resilient and Renewed**, January 2017.

² Tenant ballot on stock transfer in April 2011. 68.4% voted (3,245), 49.2% supported the transfer and 50.8% were opposed. WLGA website report.

Wales to do so. The Council is one of six councils reporting³ 100% WHQS compliance.

- 6 Based on data from the most recent return to Welsh Government, as at 31 March 2018 the Council stock was 100% compliant with WHQS. The total number of Council properties was 3,873 of which 3,100 met the WHQS standard to 'full compliance' and a further 773 were fully compliant subject to 'acceptable fails'. Full compliance refers to dwellings where the WHQS standard is achieved for all individual elements, but there can be situations where achieving the standard for an individual element is not possible. Such situations may include the cost or timing of the work, residents choosing not to have the work done or where there are physical constraints to the work. In these instances, the social landlords may record one or more elements as acceptable fails. Where a dwelling contains one or more acceptable fails, but all other elements are compliant, the dwelling is deemed by the Welsh Government to be compliant subject to acceptable fails.
- 7 Although we could not talk to everyone, we engaged with a sample of service users⁴ via a telephone survey to get their view on the WHQS programme. We also held focus groups with tenants from the Tenant Working Group and visited estates to meet the following Residents Associations: Star group from Penarth, Colcot and Compass groups from Barry and Major group from Llantwit Major. This helped us to understand the Council's rationale for their approach to WHQS, and how the Council approaches and responds to the needs and expectations of service users.
- 8 Overall, we found that **the Council has met the Welsh Housing Quality Standard with effective arrangements for tenant engagement and most tenants are satisfied with the quality of their home.**
- 9 We came to this conclusion because:
 - the Council reported it has met the Welsh Housing Quality Standard and is working with its IT provider to ensure that compliance data is accurate;
 - arrangements for tenant engagement are effective and the Council is supporting tenants wider needs; and
 - most tenants we spoke to are satisfied with the quality of their homes and the housing service, but some feel their homes are damp and there is scope to review the telephone system for reporting repairs.

³ Welsh Government, **Welsh Housing Quality Standard Welsh Government Annual Report, October 2018**

⁴ We spoke to a sample of 300 tenants in the telephone. Appendix 1 shows the results.

Proposals for improvement

Exhibit 1: proposals for improvement

Proposals for improvement	
P1	The Council should evaluate how effective the process is for tenants to report housing repairs via the Customer Contact Centre (Call One Vale).
P2	The Council should work with tenants to review its approach to assisting people experiencing problems with condensation and damp.

Detailed report

The Council has met the Welsh Housing Quality Standard with effective arrangements for tenant engagement and most tenants are satisfied with the quality of their home.

The Council reported it has met the Welsh Housing Quality Standard and is working with its IT provider to ensure that compliance data is accurate

- 10 The Council has clearly outlined the priorities for the Housing service in a range of integrated plans. These include the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) business plan, Housing and Building Services plan 2018-2022 and the annual Housing service plan 2018-2019. The plans contain direct links to show how the Housing service contributes to the delivery of the Council's Well-being outcomes and objectives in the Council's Corporate Plan 2016-2020. The financial resources for the delivery of the WHQS are set out in the HRA Business Plan, which is updated annually. The Council policy on the application of the WHQS standards is reviewed annually by the Homes and Safe Communities Scrutiny Committee and is approved by Cabinet. At the time of our fieldwork in June 2018, the Council had produced a new draft Asset Management Strategy (AMS) 2018-2023. The aim of the AMS is to ensure the effective management and maintenance of all homes and related land assets.
- 11 The Council formally reported that it has achieved full compliance with WHQS in 2018. The Council's business plans reference that the WHQS standard was achieved by 31 March 2018, and the Council is now moving into the maintenance phase of the standard, developing new homes and completing wider estate improvement works. At the meeting on 14 March 2018 of the Homes and Safe Communities Scrutiny Committee, the Head of Housing and Building Services reported the Council was 100% compliant with WHQS.
- 12 The Council's asset management IT system 'Keystone' has been reporting some incorrect data relating to WHQS compliance. During our fieldwork, the Council identified a problem with the Keystone WHQS compliance report function. This resulted in incorrect figures being reported for the number of 'acceptable fails'. The Council has reported this issue to their IT provider who acknowledged the system fault. The provider is working to fix this issue so that future reporting is accurate.
- 13 Following the identification of reporting issues with the Keystone system, the Council produced updated compliance figures. The results show 80% of its housing stock (3,077 properties) is fully compliant with WHQS and 20% (791 properties) is classed as 'acceptable failures'. Most of the acceptable fails are from

where tenants declined the improvements works or where the kitchen is too small to fit the required number of units to achieve WHQS compliance. The Council has a clear process to minimise the number of acceptable fails that starts with contacting tenants who refused WHQS works for a second time to see if their circumstances have changed. Where works are declined again they are scheduled to be completed at change of tenancy. This forms part of the ongoing programme to perform outstanding WHQS works when properties becomes void. The Council has taken a practical approach to the challenges associated with small kitchens. This includes creating an open plan kitchen diner if it is financially viable in properties that have a kitchen with an adjoining second living room.

- 14 As part of the WHQS, the Council must estimate the annual energy consumption for space and water heating using the Government's Standard Assessment Procedure for Energy Rating of Dwellings 2005 (SAP 2005) method. A result of 65 or above out of 100 must be achieved for compliance. During our fieldwork it was identified the data held on Keystone for SAP showed over 400 non-compliant properties. The Council investigated the reason for this and confirmed the result was not accurate due to a lag in updating the Keystone system with information on completed improvement works. The Councils' updated figures show 38 of the 3,868 properties are acceptable fails due to a SAP result of below 65.
- 15 The housing stock condition data that is used to support investment decisions is regularly updated. The Council commissioned an external company to complete an initial stock condition survey for the whole of its stock in 2008. The stock condition data is validated by the Council's own survey team who carry out an annual survey of 20% of stock each year. This forms a five-year rolling programme to review all the housing stock condition data. At the time of our fieldwork in June 2018, 95% of the original stock data has been re-validated and updated in Keystone. Independent external validation of the housing stock condition information has not been carried out.

Arrangements for tenant engagement are effective and the Council is supporting tenants' wider needs

- 16 The Council engages widely with stakeholders in the WHQS improvement programme. At the beginning of the project, tenants were consulted on their preference for starting on the internal or external works. Tenants voted to complete the internal works first, which started in September 2012. Our telephone survey showed that 56% of respondents recalled the Council telling them about WHQS works and 64% felt they were involved in the design or specification of improvement works. During our fieldwork, we found that tenants were given considerable choice on options for new kitchens and bathrooms.
- 17 Fifty-eight per cent of the tenants we spoke to feel the Council listens to their views on their home. Tenant feedback during the early stages of the WHQS programme prompted the Council to employ more Tenant Liaison Officers to support tenants

daily during WHQS works. Tenants can provide feedback to the Council on the WHQS programme through various channels:

- Tenant feedback is provided from the day-to-day repairs satisfaction feedback forms;
 - phone texting repairs feedback service;
 - online comments facility on the Council's website;
 - The housing section of the Council's website provides a convenient way for residents to provide feedback to the Council;
 - The complaints procedure is publicised on the Council website and resulting statistics are centrally monitored and reported to members; and
 - Housing staff also attend local estate events to promote the housing service and speak to members of the public. This includes speaking to non-tenants such as Right to Buy owners and leaseholders, who often form most of the people living on an estate.
- 18 The Council delivers a newsletter twice a year to all tenants' homes to provide information on the Housing service and includes updates on the WHQS programme.
- 19 The Council gathers a range of survey data to measure tenant satisfaction. In August 2016, the Council undertook a Survey of Tenants and Residents (STAR) on the Housing Service. Over 3,700 tenants were invited to take part and 37% (1,395 tenants) responded. The results of the survey showed satisfaction was highest for 'the neighbourhood as a place to live' and 'rent as value for money'. When we spoke to Council officers we were advised another STAR survey will be carried out in the future to measure progress, but it is unclear when this will be. Tenants are also asked to complete a satisfaction survey following completion of WHQS works, which is used to capture feedback and monitor contractor performance.
- 20 For some years, the Housing service (with the support of WHQS contractors) has run the very successful annual "Festivale" family fun and information event. Over 500 people attend each year to take part in games, activities and visit displays from the Housing Service. The Council staff we spoke to were all very supportive and enthusiastic of this event as a way of engaging with difficult to reach groups such as younger people. At the 2017 Festivale, a tenant engagement questionnaire was used to gather feedback from over 50 tenants on the draft tenant engagement strategy.
- 21 The Council has well established mechanisms for formal tenant consultation. This includes tenant groups and nine residents' associations. Council officers including the Head of Housing regularly meet with the following groups to consult and gain feedback from tenants:
- Tenant Working Group – 15 tenants whose members are individuals from the various sub groups. The Tenant Working Group monitors and coordinates the actions of the sub groups.

- Quality and Design Forum (Sub Group) – six tenants who oversee the WHQS programme and meet with contractors to monitor performance.
 - Sheltered Housing Forum (Sub Group) – meetings are held on a rolling programme at each of the five sheltered housing complexes in the Council.
 - Overview and Scrutiny - four tenants are co-opted onto the Homes and Safe Communities Scrutiny Committee to review performance and consider new proposals.
- 22 The Council has effective arrangements for tenants to be engaged in monitoring and challenging the Council's performance. The six tenants on the Quality and Design Forum hold quarterly meetings and focus on monitoring and challenging the performance of contractors. The Tenant Working Group meets every three months. Part of the group's remit includes reviewing and monitoring the performance of the Housing Service. The four tenants co-opted onto the Homes and Safe Communities Scrutiny Committee receive quarterly updates on performance and progress.
- 23 The Council is actively developing new approaches to support tenants' wider needs rather than just housing management, repairs and maintenance. In 2015, the Council set up a Community Investment Team to engage with tenants and strengthen communities. The focus of the team is to support tenants into employment and provide opportunities to gain qualifications and training. In March 2018, the team held an 'employability boot camp' for tenants who were long term unemployed and not in training. The feedback of course attendees was very positive. The team also launched the Timebanking project in October 2017. This project aims to increase volunteering amongst tenants, improve skills and strengthen community spirit. Tenants take part in volunteering activities and are rewarded with credits for leisure facilities. To date, nearly 200 tenants have participated in this project and 20 external organisations are signed up to the scheme.
- 24 Community Investment Officers are working with young tenants and their families to involve them in the football 'Kicks' project. The project aims to create safer, stronger and more resilient communities through the development of young people's potential. The officers we spoke to informed us the project has resulted in a large reduction in anti-social behaviour in Barry in the last year. It has supported over two hundred young people aged 13 to 19 years old, some of whom are not engaged in physical activity, to get involved in weekly football sessions. In the next two years, the 'Barry Kicks' project aims to support a total of five hundred young men and women from across the local area, to develop their leadership and teamwork skills, as well as their confidence.
- 25 The Community Investment Team will work with tenants to deliver a range of environmental and estate projects over the next three years. The Council has allocated a budget of £2 million each year to complete the improvement works, which are outside the scope of the WHQS programme. Tenant engagement is a key principle in this work so tenants are involved in agreeing and developing the

plan of works for each estate. For example, during the engagement with tenants on the Buttrils estate in Barry the consultation helped develop a programme that includes changes to the layout of estate, improved parking, fencing, CCTV and upgrades to communal areas and the exterior of buildings.

Most tenants we spoke to are satisfied with the quality of their homes and the housing service, but some feel their homes are damp and there is scope to review the telephone system for reporting repairs

- 26 Our telephone survey of tenants showed that most respondents are generally satisfied with the quality of the housing service:
- seventy-eight per cent of the tenants we spoke to are satisfied with the improvement works the Council has carried out to their homes;
 - seventy-four per cent of the tenants we spoke to are satisfied with the housing services they receive;
 - eighty-three per cent of the tenants we spoke to were satisfied with the condition of their kitchen;
 - eighty per cent of the tenants we spoke to were satisfied with the condition of their bathroom; and
 - eighty-four per cent of the tenants we spoke to thought that their neighbourhood is a good place to live.
- 27 Most of the tenants we spoke to during the focus groups we held also value the housing service. Many commented on the high quality of customer service provided by most housing staff. There was a general view that over the past five years, the Housing service has improved and there is now a much greater focus on the quality of work carried out. Tenants were grateful to still have what they regarded as a generally good service for carrying out repairs by the Council's own directly employed staff.
- 28 The satisfaction data from the Council's 2016 STAR survey shows most tenants are satisfied with the Housing service, quality of their home and feel they are listened to. The STAR results are benchmarked against comparable national data in the same financial year to show the performance relative to other landlords. The results are shown below:
- eighty-three per cent of tenants were satisfied with the quality of their home – benchmarked in the middle upper quartile;
 - eighty-one per cent of tenants were satisfied with the overall service – benchmarked in the middle lower quartile; and
 - sixty-nine per cent of tenants were satisfied that views were listened to and acted upon – benchmarked in the middle upper quartile of results.

- 29 The results for tenant satisfaction with WHQS works are positive. Following completion of WHQS works, tenants are sent a survey to complete to give feedback and provide a score of one to ten (ten being exceptionally satisfied) for satisfaction. The areas covered by the survey are: safety measures; communication; overall process; quality of work; and the overall service. An average is taken to give an overall score out of ten for each property. The Council sets a challenging target of eight out of ten to identify tenants who are classed as satisfied.
- In 2017-18, 67% of the 517 tenants who responded were satisfied; and
 - in 2016-17, 72% of the 326 respondents were satisfied.
- 30 The Council has also analysed its performance to consider the reasons for any tenant dissatisfaction. The 2017-18 end of year performance report to the Homes and Safe Communities Scrutiny Committee identified two main factors that had a negative impact on tenant satisfaction: external works taking a long time to complete from the tenants' perspective and poor communication between contractors and tenants. The Council addressed this with contractors, which resulted in the removal of work from three contractors and withholding payments for works that were not fully completed.
- 31 Another challenge for the Council was some large national firms sub-contracting works that in some instances resulted in poor workmanship. The Council responded to poor performance by insisting standards improved or the contract would be terminated. This happened for two of the main contractors who failed to improve.
- 32 Our telephone survey showed that 27% of the tenants we spoke to felt they had problems with damp in their home. Most of these tenants (72% of the respondents) had reported the damp to the Council where the main way of identifying it was visible mould in the property (71% of cases). We have conducted a similar survey in the last 12 months at all 11 councils that retained their housing stock and this issue is a significant problem elsewhere in Wales. Damp and condensation issues are a complex problem, and without conducting a full house survey we cannot determine the reasons for this. During our fieldwork some of the staff and tenants we spoke to felt there are damp issues in some homes, which previously had cavity wall insulation installed that has now failed. Nevertheless, a breakdown of the respondents in our survey shows the WHQS works have had a positive impact on damp in properties. Respondents reported damp in 37% of non-compliant properties, 28% of compliant properties and 16% of properties classed as acceptable fails.
- 33 The Council has a process for investigating damp but not all tenants are satisfied with the outcome. The Council investigates reports of damp to identify the reason, which may in some cases be due to tenant lifestyle and issues with condensation. Our conversations with tenants in focus groups suggests the Council is investigating complaints for damp but the problem is not usually resolved to the tenants' satisfaction.

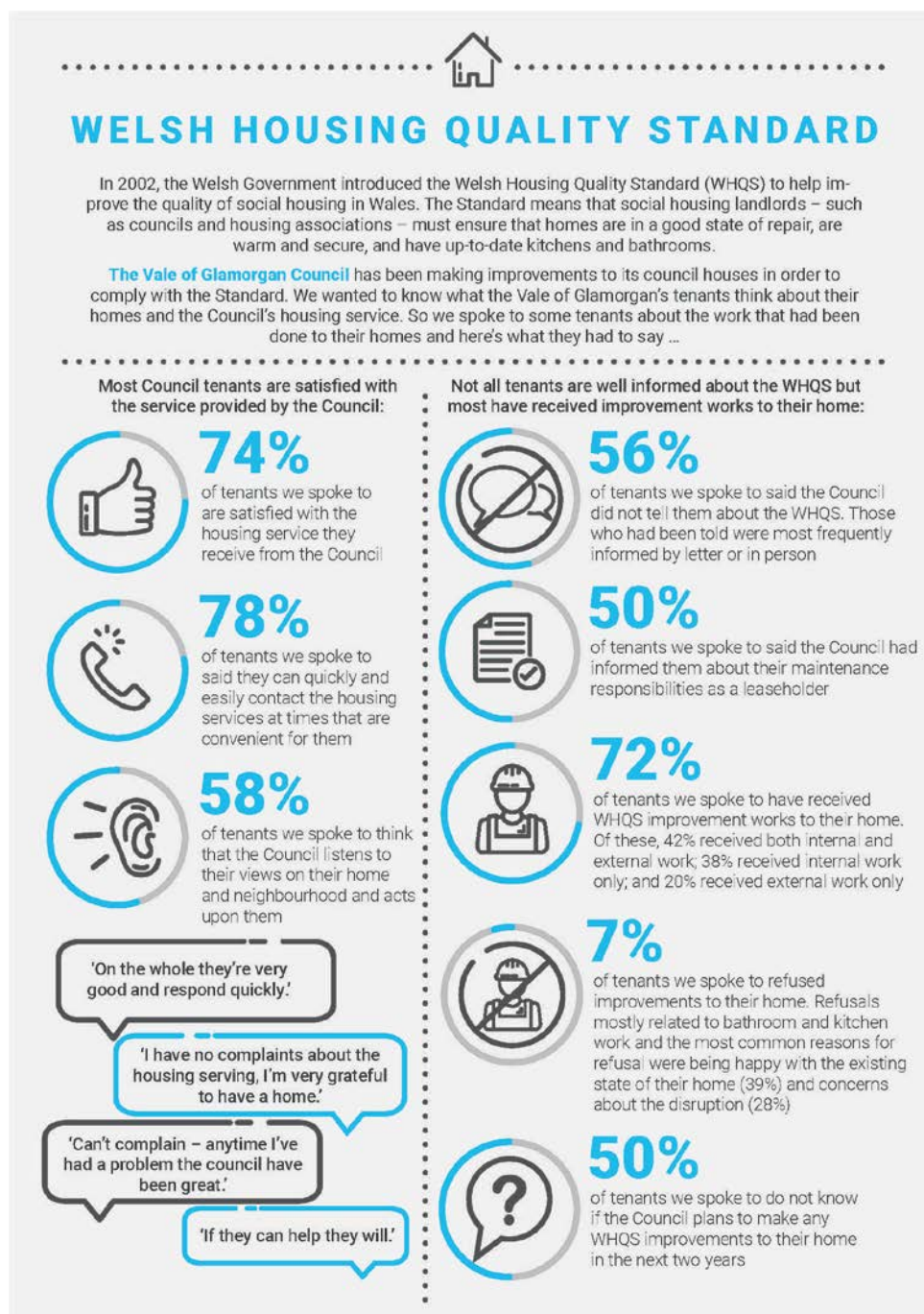
- 34 Most tenants we spoke to in our phone survey felt their homes were warm enough in winter, but 27% did not. The main reason for not being able to heat their home in winter was draft proofing (38% of the respondents). The Council has relatively few homes (37 out of 3,868) which do not meet the WHQS standard for warmth (SAP 65⁵ or above rating). Over recent years, the Council has invested in a range of new approaches, such as external wall insulation, to help overcome the problem of cold homes. The Council is investing additional resources in future years to address the issue of the remaining homes that do not meet the WHQS standard for warmth.
- 35 Most tenants we spoke to are satisfied that they can easily contact the Housing service, but there are concerns with the telephone process of reporting repairs. Most of the tenants we spoke to in our telephone survey (78% of all respondents) thought they could easily and quickly contact the Housing Service at a time that was convenient to them. However, when we held our focus groups many tenants informed us they were not satisfied with the process for reporting repairs via the generic contact centre 'Call One Vale'. Common problems identified by focus group participants were the length of time taken to navigate through the automated phone system to report a repair, the lack of technical knowledge of contact centre staff and the frequent errors by the Contact centre in correctly reporting repairs to the Housing service staff. These issues were acknowledged by some of the Council staff that we spoke to during our review who informed us the Council is looking into introducing an online system for reporting day to day repairs.

⁵ SAP 65. 2015. WHQS states the Welsh Government vision that 'all households in Wales... shall have the opportunity to live in good quality homes that are adequately heated, fuel efficient and well insulated.' The target energy rating to comply with the WHQS is a Standard Assessment Procedure (SAP) rating of 65.

Appendix 1

Infographic summarising the key findings from the completed surveys

Exhibit 2: housing service infographic



Most tenants are happy with the condition of their homes and the WHQS improvements the Council has made:



78%

of tenants we spoke to are satisfied with the improvement works the Council has carried out on their home



59%

of those we spoke to said the Council completed the improvement works within the specified timescale



64%

of tenants we spoke to were involved in the design or specification of some of the improvement works to their home



83%

of tenants we spoke to are satisfied with the overall condition of their kitchen



80%

of tenants we spoke to are satisfied with the overall condition of their bathroom



67%

of tenants we spoke to are satisfied with how the outside of their home looks



84%

of tenants we spoke to are satisfied with their neighbourhood as a place to live

'The improvements are great.'

'All good – the outside took ages but we are warmer and our bills have gone down.'

'I'm very happy with the works, they've been wonderful.'

'I'm delighted to have a nice modern kitchen.'

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



27%

of tenants we spoke to find it difficult to heat their homes to a comfortable level in the winter. Draught proofing was the most common reason cited



27%

of tenants we spoke to had experienced problems with damp in their home. In most cases, tenants identified the damp through visible mould and had informed the Council of the problem



Read the full report on the Vale of Glamorgan Council's housing service on our website: www.audit.wales

This survey was delivered as telephone interviews by Strategic Research and Insight from 30 April to 11 May 2018. We spoke to 300 tenants from across the county. This represents around 8% of all council tenant households.

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