

COUNCIL – 21 NOVEMBER 2017

QUESTIONS FROM COUNCILLORS

QUESTION FROM COUNCILLOR D EVERITT TO COUNCILLOR R D BAYLISS

“A cleaning service for the shared enclosed access to flats has been introduced to tenants of flats in NWLDC including Woodside estate Thringstone. They were sent a letter and a form asking for them to state if they would like to receive the cleaning service at a charge of £5.98 a week. It was stated correctly and made clear that housing benefit will cover the charge for those in receipt of housing benefit. The letter also stated that if tenants chose not to reply that would count as agreeing to accept the cleaning service. There are however many reasons why a tenant might not reply but still not want the service. This resulted in tenants who are working and not receiving housing benefit who have always kept the area of their front doors clean and tidy and chose not to receive the service being forced with a threat of eviction to accept it. They are being made to pay for a service when other tenants who did not want the service have received a letter stating they would not be required to receive it. On the other hand disabled and other residents who may benefit from this service may find it is denied to them. It is in fact a rent increase as stated in the second letter, for some and not others. This is both undemocratic and unfair for this council to presume to know the views of those tenants who did not care or were unable to reply and use them to influence the result. Does the Portfolio holder agree with me?

1. That it is unacceptable that tenants are being forced to accept a service the neither need or want following a consultation decided by misappropriating the views of non-participating neighbours?
2. There are 10 blocks of 3 flats on the Woodside estate. How many of these tenants returned the form?
3. How many tenants replied yes?
4. How many replied no?
5. How many did not reply?
6. Do you accept that this council's desire to provide a service for old and disabled tenants who cannot clean the communal area themselves is to be applauded, however the way it has been implemented in Woodside has left some old and disabled without the service but provided it where it is neither needed nor wanted?
7. Is this a service charge as described in the letter offering the service, or is it a rent increase as described in the letter demanding payment for some and not others, damaging tenant cohesion and bringing this council into disrepute?”

RESPONSE FROM COUNCILLOR R D BAYLISS

“In May 2017, we wrote to 255 tenants who live in flats at 52 blocks across the District advising them that we were considering introducing a communal area cleaning service to help improve the general upkeep and appearance of the estates. The cost of the service would be recovered through the introduction of a new service charge payable by the tenants who benefited. For those in receipt of Housing Benefit the charge would be included as an eligible housing cost and depending on their level of income they could receive help to pay it, if introduced. Tenants were asked to return an attached form if they did not want to receive the new cleaning service. It was determined that if more than 50% of residents in each block did not want the service, it would not be introduced. In total, 103 (40%) responses were received, 102 completed the form stating they did not want the service and one letter from a resident who supported the idea of the Council introducing the service. Following analysis of these results on a block by block basis, the service was subsequently introduced.

The response to the specific questions about the Thringstone blocks are as follows:

1. 57% of the tenants at the Thringstone blocks responded to the survey and the responses were then considered on a block by block basis. This resulted in 5 of the 10 blocks on the estate being removed from the proposed service. Of the remaining 5 blocks, no responses were received from the residents in 3 blocks and 1 response from a resident in each of the remaining two blocks. The approach taken shows that feedback received from tenants was used to inform where the service was introduced.
2. 17 tenants returned the form.
3. Tenants were asked to return the form if they did not want the service. No responses were received saying they wanted the service, as none were requested.
4. 17 tenants replied saying they did not want the service.
5. 13 tenants did not respond.
6. The decision to include the blocks of flats in the communal cleaning contact was to introduce a new service available for tenants to help improve the general upkeep and appearance of the estates. The views of tenants were used to inform where the service was introduced.
7. Where the service has been introduced, a new service charge has been applied. As with all other service charges, for the purpose of collection, it is included with the weekly rent. Any variation of the rent and/or service charge is subject to four weeks prior notification and for legal reasons by the tenants remaining in the property at the end of the four weeks notification, they become liable to pay the new charges.

The approach we have taken shows we have listened to the feedback from our tenants and the new charge has been applied to only those tenants who are benefitting from the service.

In addition to introducing the new cleaning service to enhance the environment of the estate, we have recently completed Phase 1 of an estate improvement programme. This has seen the communal stairwells for all 10 of the blocks of flats completely refurbished and upgraded, with new windows and redecoration. Phase 2 is currently being commissioned and will see the external fabric of tenants homes redecorated across the estate, with Phase 3 to follow by upgrading the communal parking areas and exploring the opportunities for new build on in-fill sites.

This represents a significant investment by the Council in upgrading the Woodside estate, and the communal cleaning service forms an important part of protecting that investment”.