**CSI SERVICE REVIEW of GARAGES**

**Report to Executive Team, 2nd March 2012.**

1. **INTRODUCTION**

Customer Service Inspectors (CSI) was formed in the March of 2011 to scrutinise housing services from Cheshire West & Chester (CWAC).

This is our third service scrutiny report, and we have selected to look at the garages service.

We chose to look at garages because of the difference in condition of various garage sites, and the general deterioration of a larger number of properties, and at any difficulties that may arise in the application for a garage.

For the purpose of this review, we have looked at literature available from the council, and we have also looked at examples of detail and quality provided by other landlords for this service.

We have concentrated our investigation on the number of garages empty and not let, the condition of the garages and garage sites and their future, rental charges and the way the recent rent increase has been used for garage improvements and the management of garages.

As CSI, we are recommending a revision of the garage tenancy agreement and the garage policy.

We would like to secure full customer participation and advice in the involvement of new ways of managing garages.

We lost 3 CSIs during this review and gained 2 new CSIs, but this did not hamper our ability to get things done as we are motivated to success and keen to get started on our next review.

1. **WHAT CSI LOOKED AT**

Before starting this review, we received a presentation from CWAC staff connected to the garage service about how this service works, and is managed. This gave us the base from which to decide which parts of the service to explore.

We studied a variety of documents and some performance indicator data used by CWAC to manage the garage service.

The documents provided and reviewed were;

* CWAC Housing Management Services Garage Procedure (Draft)
* CWAC Garage Agreement
* CWAC Garage Policy (Draft)
* CWAC Garage Application Form
* CWAC Website
* CWAC Garages Leaflet
* CWAC Garage Performance Report (Apr 2011 – Dec 2011)
* Websites and Policies of Other Landlords

CSI also conducted interviews with members of staff to obtain data on officer interpretation, comprehension and the application of the policy and procedure.

Separate interviews were held in regards to:

* Rent Arrears & Payments
* Tenancy Management
* Repairs & Improvements
* Allocations & Voids

We also interviewed tenants through:

* Holding a Focus Group
* Speaking to Residents in Person (Market Stall)

CSI would like to thanks the mystery shopping team, one whom had visited 16 different garage sites around Ellesmere Port (see appendix 1), and some others made phone calls, visits. (See appendix 2)

CSI also placed suggestion boxes placed for all staff at both Rossfield Road depot and Civic Way offices for any suggestions they may have.

1. **CSI CHOICE OF THE GARAGES SERVICES FOR SCRUTINY**

CSI intends to make suggestions for service improvement, both from a customer service viewpoint and to improve the management and delivery of the service, so that CWAC can deliver maximum value for money from rental charges collected.

The reasons for the CSI interest about garages at CWAC were;

* To agree a lettable standard for garages
* To repair & maintain the garage stock to an acceptable level
* To see a report detailing the income and expenditure of monies collected from the garage rent increases
* To improve information available regarding the availability of vacant garage sites, and the length of waiting list for those sites.

1. **Reviewing Information From Other Organisations**

We researched policies, leaflets and websites available from other organisations to suggest a way that can be easily incorporated into CWAC policy to assist the service provided.

These organisations are;

* Brighton & Hove City Council
* Milton Keynes Council
* North Ayrshire Council
* East Ayrshire Council
* Sovereign – Kingfisher
* Barrow Borough Council
* Waverley Borough Council
* North-East Lincolnshire Council
* Aberdeen City Council
* Berneslai Homes
* Warwick District Council
* The Moray Council
* The Wrekin Housing Trust

**What the CSIs liked about the Garage Agreement at The Wrekin Housing Trust:**

* Plain English
* Thorough about uses permitted
* Covers all items and amounts of, that can be stored
* Covers just about anything else a garage could potentially be used for
* Well laid out

**What CSIs liked about documents from the Wrekin Housing Trust:**

* CSIs liked the webpage, application form, tenancy agreement from **The Wrekin Housing Trust**, which we found to be the most comprehensive of the policies/websites, but also covered almost every use for a garage in plain and simple English so as to leave no doubt about terms and conditions. We would like CWAC to consider replicating the way in which Wrekin manages their garages.

**What the CSIs liked about the Website** (from The Wrekin Home Trust):

* Easy to find the information about garages
* Has all relevant information to hand

1. **What We Found - Strengths**

We have summarised the results of our findings from the interviews held with staff, from mystery shopping carried out on the garage service, and from speaking to customers directly in a focus group and at a market stall.

5.1 Tenancy Management

* CWAC have finally started to work and manage the garages
* Can recover the garage for breach of agreement in 7 days
* We were told that the PCSOs, the A.S.B. team and the Neighbourhood Wardens work together with the Housing Team when issues are identified.
* Benchmarked rents with CDHT and Weaver Vale
* Arranged for Small Businesses to be allowed to use the garage for some storage purposes
* Don’t feel that A.S.B. is a problem – did not know of any large problem not dealt with

5.2 Allocations & Voids

* Improved marketing since April 2011 and increased lettings by 60
* CWAC now have three people who could let a garage
* Arranged for each area to have a separate waiting list which is reviewed on a monthly basis.
* Advertised empty garages – Have recently designed an application form and a let – pack
* A Refusal of a garage site does not place you back down the list
* The Waiting list kept in order of date applied
* Rules are in place to inform customers of the storage of flammables
* Can have a tenancy over a short period of time, if required
* Dedicated team to do a walkabout, when requested
* A Debt check is made on council tenants to ensure they do not owe arrears more than £250
* Garage lettings are now on computer system
* A recent purge has been carried out on the waiting list to ensure those who are on it still want to rent a garage
* If you do not get the garage site you wanted, you can transfer after 12months occupation if you transfer your home

5.3 Policy & Procedures

* This is a new area, and Officers are inviting comments on it, as it is new and there was no previous policy
* Garage procedure states that your garage will be removed if you are in arrears at stage 3 (but is does not say how quickly)
  1. Maintenance
* Policy of 20 day turnaround of voids – (but does not seem to be implemented – also, 4 weeks is a long time)
* Put the rent up on the garages, which is to be spent on the repair and upkeep of garages
* Recognise a need for an investment plan
* RMU have visited every site and done a report on what should happen with them, including demolition and the repair and letting (though we had this very late in the inspection.)
* Have a garage working group in place, but we don’t know of any tenants on it

5.5 Review of Garage Application Form

* Easy to follow
* Can apply for up to four different sites
* Joint tenancy is possible – 2 people can rent a garage
* Garages are not just for council tenants

5.6 Garage Agreement Review

* Asks for rent in advance
* States a rule on non-storage of flammable products

**6 What We Liked About CWAC which we do not want to change**

* Cheapest rental
* Can be paid weekly and in numerous ways in comparison to others that use Direct Debit or standing order payments only
* Has a 7 day notice period as opposed to the 28 days at other organisations
* There is not a fluctuation in rental charges, regardless of how many garages are rented, which we found elsewhere

1. **Weaknesses at CWAC We Found**

**General**

CSIs did not have the co-operation we had enjoyed when we completed the Complaints review. Officers did not provide information quickly or at all in some cases EG. Arrears information and we did not find out about the stock condition survey until very late.

CSIs were unable to access Housemark as we had in our previous review, so we could access good practice. We used Google, but this was hard. We would like to clarify why this has been stopped.

Generally it feels as if the Council is not supporting our work as volunteers as much as they did at the last review.

**We found the following weaknesses in the garage services:**

7.1 Tenancy Management

* Can have a garage if customer owes £250. WE do not think this should be allowed unless this is due to delays in receiving Housing Benefit owed.
* RMU survey showed that this was an area of neglect for a number of years – When will it be complete and what are the priorities?
* Estate Walkabouts not taking in every site and when they do, we do not have a list to check of occupied and empty garages.
* No plan for demolition in itself – not timed and the future not clear for the site usage once demolished – no evidence of consultation on some sites which have been demolished, for example Woodvale Road, and another at the side of Durham Court. It is not clear in the policy who is to be consulted, garage users or the community and what the approval system is from Council and staff.
* The future of demolished sites is not made clear to the local community
* Potential garage users we spoke to felt that if they kept their car in the garages that the car would be damage due to the lack of upkeep of the garages, potholes, they were worried about lighting and security as well as the poor condition. One said he felt his car would be safer on the road. Another said they were scruffy, not painted and could not ever recall a painting programme for the garages. Another had to move to an adjoining garage due to the poor state of his garage. Most said they felt no benefit from the garage rent increase and value was not being delivered.
* The repair and housing management team will need to consult with tenants over any demolition – no progress since they gave us the list in November – not sure if the council has approved demolition.
* Garage information on website is poor
* What else have CWaC benchmarked? ( service – policies)
* Can they be advertised to the private sector and owners
* P&P to be reviewed annually
* Not clear when the improvement plan will start and end, and what will happen on each site
* The garage users at Parklands View have been asked to vacate their garages with 7 days’ notice as they are being demolished; the garages are mainly occupied, though they are in poor condition. There has been no consultation with the users or the community about this or the future of the site and we do not believe this has been approved by the Housing Stock Panel. We do not understand why this has to happen so quickly and we are concerned with the lack of consultation.

7.2 Allocations and Voids Weaknesses

* There is no easy access to information on waiting list and where the void garages are
* Map is out of date and some garage sites shown to us are not there
* No map could be located for Neston area
* Too many void garages not collecting rent
* Some staff who were not working on garages said they could not advise tenants how to apply for a garage
* Not convinced that CWAC has audited the empty garages against the list of voids. Do not detect abandonment or misuse.
* It is not clear why, when there is a waiting list, or where there are full lettings on sites – why is CWAC is planning demolition of sites
* When we asked for a garage, we were asked for number of garage site. Tenant has no way of knowing this
* Too long a period before arrears are flagged for action
* Tenants are not given priority for a garage
* Short-term lease for garage is possible (not advertised as such). If CWAC did advertise this facility, could an increased rate be charged?
* Length of tenancy required is not available on the application form
* Pay point payments- tenants are not aware of locations at which to use this. It may be located too far away for easy access, and would have preferred there to still a payment facility in the Civic Way building
* With the application form, there should be a garage map to at least give the customer of nearby garage site suitable as a 2nd, 3rd or 4th choice
* It says on the website that you can view a garage site map in the Westminster offices, Civic Way, and the Town hall in Neston. We checked at Civic Way and were told that there was not one available early in the review but this was rectified by our 2nd mystery shopping visit
* We tested the on-line application, and got a form that was very difficult to complete online and had to printed off to be properly filled in, which then incurs the postage costs
* Was told there was a waiting list, but did not say how many were on the list or the average time lets took on that site.
* If there is a void garage on an otherwise populated garage site and there is the need for a garage in that area, an inspector will be sent out to assess probable cost of repair
* Not enough incentive given to assist letting unpopular sites. Suggest tidy and marketing campaign, reduced rents or free rent weeks to encourage future letting.
* Awaiting new marketing on council website
* 41 garages returned due to poor condition
* 14 days before having to decide whether to take lease or not
* Dedicated team do not have a void list to see which garages may have been abandoned
* With large waiting lists and void garages, why the need to demolish sites?
* Who will get the priority on the hard standing if they are demolished?

7.3 Policy and Procedures

* Garage use is for cars or motorcycles, but we know of storage is occurring on some of these instead.
* How do CWaC promote the use of garages? We do not know what they are or how successful they have been.
* The policy says that CWaC have a marketing strategy, but CWaC don’t have one for marketing as officers were unable to give us a copy or tell us what it was
* CWaC say garage sites will be repaired and repairs implemented
* Any new tenant can have a debt of over £250 yet still be awarded a garage. We think there should be no outstanding arrears and this should be removed
* We do not know what an EIA is, we have not had a copy, and the officers did not know what its content was.
* Says that there is a programme of works – the policy discusses this but we have not been given a programme or consulted on it
* Says will publish KPIs – but not available to NEPTRO
* There are many abbreviations in the policy and procedures which we do not understand

7.4 Maintenance

* Policy of 20 day turnaround of voids – but does not seem to be implemented – also 4 weeks is a long time – not much in it, especially as it’s the same as a house.
* No policy or strategy that we work to on waiting times for repairs. Need to be clear and honest with tenants, even if timescales are longer than household repairs
* Most of the work is contracted out, adds time to delays. Officers say that delays due to tenders, can this work be done by Rossfield Road?
* Not enough use is made of the community payback scheme for painting and minor repairs. Can this be investigated?
* There are a number of suggestions we have from the mystery shopping that was carried out by the shoppers and the CSIs, who visited nearly all the garage sites
  + Better signage required at most sites
  + Better lighting for security and access
  + Area around the garages are neglected
  + Many roofs appear to need repair
  + Most have different locks – so can’t tell if anyone is using most of them
  + Can’t easily be checked for the purpose of use
  + A lot of the sites have some weeds obstructing access
  + Garage roads need potholes filling
  + Poor drainage on many, making them damp which means the doors are all rotting at the bottom – future expense of the Council
* CSIs were given a list of garage sites, but when we visited them, some had been turned into allotments and others had been cleared/turned over but not grassed, but there were no garages on the site
* Staff told us that garages needed lighting, roof repairs, annual painting, weeding and that complaints were received about roof repairs and rotten doors.

7.5 Review of Application Form

* Does not ask what garage is to be used for
* With a joint site, only one address is required. Is this the same address? This should be clearer.
* No limit to amount of garages leased to the same person. Is that a fair policy with others on the list?

7.6 Garage Agreement Review

* It is not clear in section 4 what is being said and an NTQ is not explained. Tenants did not know what this meant
* It is not clear if you can sublet
* Should tenants of garages say what the make and model of car stored is, and should then give notification of future vehicle changes?
* No accompanied garage viewing before accepting or refusing garage. We understand this would be expensive but we have evidence that it is indeed a case of “Sign here” and that’s it.

**7. Key CSI Recommendations**

CSIs would like CWAC to take actions outlined above, but in particular we feel there are some specific actions which represent out main concerns as follows:

1. We would like CWAC to share with garage users and the local communities the plans for all garage sites in open door and by direct mail to those who do not get open door who rent a garage. This should include a plan for each garage site, including:
   * A plan to maintain it, OR
   * A plan for major improvements and if so what type of improvement is planned, OR
   * A plan to demolish the site in the future and when this is likely to happen
2. Where the future of the garages or the garage sites has not already been approved by the Housing Stock Panel, we would like CWAC to consult fully with the garage users and the local community on any planned programme works or demolition, within a reasonable period of time from accepting this report.
3. We would like to see a separate budget for garages which includes the additional income raised, so we can review how it is being spent in 12 months.
4. We would like CWAC to develop a Planned Maintenance programme for every site which includes prioritisation of:
   * Lighting
   * Security
   * Maintenance
   * Signage
   * Potholes
5. We would like NEPTRO to be consulted and involved in the way in which money raised from rent increases in 2011 onwards will be spent in 2012 onwards and annually.
6. We would like KPIs to be sent to NEPTRO on garages as follows:
   * Number of empty garages
   * Number of let garages
   * Number of garages planned for demolition
   * Average rent arrears per garage user (occupied garages)
   * Number of repossessions/evictions from garages
   * Improvement budget spent
   * Improvement budget remaining for the year
   * Capital budget spent
   * Capital budget remaining for the year
   * Whether programmes for demolition, improvement and capital are on track for delivery
7. We would like CWAC to replicate the paperwork, agreement, procedures, policies and website information used at Wrekin Housing Trust.
8. We would like CWAC to let garages to tenants who owe no rent arrears, unless they are due to outstanding payments of Housing Benefit, or the standing order/direct debit is due.
9. We believe that potential garage renters only need 7 days to decide if they want a garage, rent is being lost waiting for 14 day decisions
10. The average rent arrears per garage is very high and we worked out this was on average about £80+ which is 40 weeks rent. This cannot be due to late direct debits. We feel the following procedure should apply:
    * A letter at 2 weeks arrears
    * A reminder 2 weeks later
    * A notice served a week later
    * Repossession starting at week 6 or 7 with one weeks’ notice
11. We would like to see a lettable standard introduced for garages which is developed with tenants
12. We would like to support CWAC to produce a good marketing strategy and action plan to prioritise and let the empty garages

**8. What we would like to happen next**

We would like you to turn this into an action plan for 22nd March. Our next meeting is 23rd March and we would like to sign this off at that meeting.

**9. Final Comments**

CSI would like to thank the officers and tenants for giving their time to help us with this review. In particular we would like to thank Hazel who organised the staff suggestion boxes with us and arranged for us to have use of the Councils market stall.

* CSI will make ourselves available to officers to clarify issues raised and we will support officers by commenting and helping you shape the new ways of working.
* CSI look forward to moving on to improve the garage service in partnership with the council.

**CSI look forward to working with you on our next service review.**

**Appendix ONE**

GARAGE SITES VISITED

This is the list of a number of garage sites that have been visited by CSI members or members of the mystery shopping group, and the opinions of site condition.

Site 16 – Woodvale Road

A lot cleaner than it has been, but in need of re- tarmacking and a fresh coat of paint. No signage to indicate garage site, and inadequate lighting since the removal of light about 9 years ago.

Site 171 – Parklea

All doors need painting, but site has good lighting

Site 75 – Parklands View

Lighting is poor, garages in poor condition and a lot of weeds and household waste being dumped on site. The tarmac needs redoing, the locks are rusty, and is on a demolition site and is subsequently being used for on-site parking.

Site 166 – Hylton Court (7 garages)

Easy to access and adequate lighting, although there is no signage on view.

Is generally in a neat and tidy condition, although the gutter is hanging over garages 1-7. No fencing around area, just the posts around the garage site. A mix of wooden and metal doors, with one door damaged near to the lock with a big dent in it.

Site 169 – Bodiam Court (6 garages)

Easy to access and is generally neat and tidy. There is adequate lighting, and there is a blue sign, but is not clear what it says due to poor condition.

There is a pool of standing water outside garage 3, and a downspout is missing.

Site 140 – Ewloe Court

Access through a side passage. Area is accessible and tidy, though lighting could be improved. There are weeds growing around the garages and there is no signage. There is also some spray paint vandalism on site, along with broken glass on site.

Site 74 – New Road (14 garages)

Not good visually – look dated and worn, poor concrete showing signs of stress and crumbling. Leaky roofing. Gutter hanging loose. No down-pipes.

Site 167 – School Lane

Access to site difficult – cars parking across access, entrance lighting is ok, but poorly lit on site, overgrown with weeds and has leaves lying on floor, abandoned car showing signs of A.S.B., doors are light in build and rigidity – could be forced open easily, roofing covered in moss and leaves, gutter and fascia boards broken and rotten, showing signs of water damage, and there are cars parked on there from nearby work – site causing difficulty of access.

Site 59 – Cavell Drive

Identified as two separate sites, but only appears to be one, containing 27 garages. No lighting, and is overgrown with weeds on ground which is very uneven. Number of potholes at entrance to site, which is poorly signed. Doors are rotting and in need of re-paining. Locks are also rusty.

Site 34 – Faraday Road

No lighting, the concrete posts between garages are crumbling. The area is used as a congregating site by youths, and has been reported to police.

The doors are rotten at the bottom, and there is rusty water leaking through the roof area onto cars parked in garages. Also needs re- painting.

Site 132 – Bamburgh Court (12 garages, 1 boarded up)

Good access onto site with adequate lighting. Blue signs now unreadable, small amounts of weeds growing, some mild graffiti, fascia boards are rotten and in need of paint. Not all of the doors are numbered, and the area is used by children as a football pitch during school holidays/ summer time.

Site 40 – Regent Street

Access is ok, with overall condition being rough. Household and domestic rubbish dumped on site, which in itself is in need of refurbishment.

Site 42 – Cholmondley Road

Doors rotten and boarded up, covered with graffiti and weeds growing

Site 64 – Thornwythe Road (4 blocks – site 65 & 68)

Relatively good condition. Is visible from the road.

Site 21 & 19 – Hargrave Road

No signage. Garages differ from other council garages in design. Small amount of weeds growing.

Site 16 – The Boulevard and site 40 – Regent Street

Overgrown with brambles and those situated in an out of sight area are used as rubbish dumps.

Site 58 – Princes Road

Is in decent overall condition, and is in view of a main road.

Site 69 – Bebington Road

Fair access to garage site, but in poor condition. Good lighting from the 2 lamps, but the site is badly weeded and some of the 17 doors need replacing, others in need of repair, but all need painting.

Site 70 – Bebington Road

Fair access to the site in a reasonable condition, but with little or no lighting.

Of the 37 garages on the site, one had a door missing altogether, and there may be up to 7 empty garages on the site (judged by growth of weeds in front of doors), most of which are in bad repair and in need of a fresh coat of paint at least.

Site 81 – Percival Road

Poor access to site on a road in poor condition and badly lit. No signs near garages and all the doors are in poor condition and in need of repair/decoration of some type, with 3 potentially empty garages.

Site 48 – Ringway

Fair access to the 18 garages on site on a fair driveway. Poorly lit area, only small amount of light from nearby lamp upon entrance to site.

1 possible empty garage, some weeding in the area and the condition of the doors is poor.

Site 50 – Charter Crescent

Poor condition of access to the 17 garages on this site, (3 possible empty).

Doors in poor condition, with some weed growth on site.

Site 11 – Thamesdale

Poor access to this site, road in fair condition with little or no lighting in the area, and considerable weeding over. Doors are in a poor condition.

Site 112 – Harlech Court

Fair condition of access road and entry itself. Poor lighting and no visible signage, but general condition of doors is good apart from need of painting.

Site 113 – Denbigh Court

Good access road into easily accessed garage area. Poor lighting and signage, fairly clear of weeds and the garages appeared to be in good condition.

The following sites were visited, but there were no garages found (possibly due to demolition). These sites are; **Site 29** – Pound Road/ **Site 49** – Thornton Road/ **Site 156** – Rivacre Road/ **Site 35** – Hillside Drive/**Site 38** – Edward Street/**Site 46** – Rostherne Avenue and **site 47** – Northern Rise.

Conclusion drawn on sites visited

Those sites out of site from a main road have a larger amount of growing weeds and rubbish, although it is not exclusive to these sites.

Fascia boards rotten, possibly due to gutters over-flowing, and/or lack of fresh painting.

As a result, we feel that rotting doors may soon be an expensive issue, which may have been avoidable with regular cleaning and maintenance of sites.

These problems contribute to bringing down the appearance of relevant areas.

We also feel that new doors would not only improve the “feel” of an area, but would give customers a feeling of security where they park their car. In conjunction with this, the introduction/repairing of lighting in these areas would also add to this security.

**Appendix TWO**

**MS1 Visit to civic Way and then follow up call**

One MS wrote for an application form, he then got a phone call with regards to his letter, but not an application form. Staff member phoned him on 20th of February, and he sent off the letter on Feb 9th.

They said there was one garage was available, and then noticed that there was a person on the waiting list whom had to be offered the garage first. They said they would ring back and let him know. It’s the 23rd today and he has not had an application form yet.

**MS2 Visit to Civic Way**

* Asked about garage letting
* Very helpful
* Brought a map out and helped to identify the site
* Brought an application form out and we can sort it straight away
* MS2 took application form with her for later date
* Badge turned away hiding identity
* Staff member did not ask to check MS2’s details were correct on file

**MS3 Phone call**

* 3 rings – staff answered, giving name
* Asked about little Sutton garages
* Nearest was Forge road, nowhere near MS3 – nice and well kept
* Very professional polite and friendly – was able to deal with the enquiry in a satisfactory manner
* Staff member asked if there was anything else
* She sent MS3 the garage application form
* She did not ask MS3 to check the details were correct

**MS4 Mystery phone call**

* Same thing – rang up for a garage application form
* 3 rings before an answer
* Gave greeting, name and department
* Was told there was a waiting list for each site and she asked for e-mail address so she could send the form to MS4
* Very polite and friendly
* It was a polite and helpful and good service
* She did not ask about updating MS4’s details
* When the e-mail containing the application form arrived, it was in a PDF format which had to be printed off before completion and returning in the post, which makes no practical sense unless freepost address was also included in the message.

**END**