

16 March 2023

## REPORT OF GENTOO

### 1. Purpose of Report

1. The following report provides an update from Gentoo for the Washington Area Committee from December to March 2023.

### 2. Background

2.1 Area Committee agreed that regular updates from Gentoo would be presented to each Committee meeting to enable members to be up to date on current Gentoo developments, projects, and priorities.

### 3 Update on Neighbourhood Services

3.1 Gentoo continue to work on a tenancy sustainability plan to support tenants impacted with the cost-of-living crisis, who may be facing poverty because they cannot heat their home, pay their rent, or buy the essentials they need for themselves or their children. Tenancies fail for multiple reasons of which financial resilience is only one, and often a symptom of the real cause, such as vulnerability, relationship breakdown, low incomes, and unemployment. The Gentoo support teams work with tenants to provide extra support and the Department of Levelling up Housing and Communities has held up the work of Gentoo's Positive Engagement officers, as good practice. The PEO's work with tenants who have complex needs, such as drug and alcohol issues, which impact their ability to sustain their tenancy.

A Gentoo cost-of-living survey was sent out through social media during November 2022, with tenants asked twelve questions relating to how well they thought they might cope with the cost of living. Within two weeks 1550 responses had been received.

When asked *'how worried are you about the cost-of-living crisis?'* 51% said extremely or very worried with only 6% saying not worried at all. When asked *'how well do you think you will be able to cope with the cost-of-living crisis?'*, 46.47% said either extremely or very well. With 17.78% saying not so well or not well at all. Of all respondents, 76.27% had used a food bank in the previous 6 months. In response to *'What is your biggest concern about the cost-of-living crisis?'* 45.41% of respondents, stated, *'paying rent'* with *'paying energy bills'* at 24.59% and *'buying food'* at 22.47%.

Pension Credit is one of the most underclaimed benefits in the UK and is extra money to help you cover your costs if you're over State Pension age and living on a low income. Gentoo have promoted Pension Credit eligibility through social media and the website to encourage this group of tenants to claim. To also support this age group of vulnerable tenants, Gentoo have worked in partnership with the DWP and Northumbrian Water to identify those pensionable age tenants who would qualify for water rates support, the collaborative work with the agencies has resulted in approximately 2,762 tenants being awarded a discount of between 10 and 50% of their water charges (Gentoo now have 8,629 tenants who have benefited from this support).

There continues to be poverty for families receiving universal credit, Gentoo currently has 10,683 tenants claiming universal credit. These tenants are supported monthly during the first four months of their claim by specialist officers, who ensure that access to all available services and financial support is discussed.

We continue to support initiatives such as 'Share the Warmth' campaign which distributes used coats, scarfs, and hats to individuals in need, we continue to work with utility suppliers to support tenants struggling to pay their bills and offer support through Gentoo's 'Crisis Fund'. Currently this year (up to the end of February) 774 requests have been assessed, and a spend of £28,549 has already issued to tenants to top up their gas and electricity meters. Tenants are still able to access professional Money Matters support should they find themselves in financial difficulty and demand for this service has dramatically increased in the last three months.

- 3.2 The Tenant Satisfaction Measures were created by the Regulator of Social Housing as a new system for assessing how well social housing landlords in England are doing at providing good quality homes and services.  
From 1 April 2023, landlords must start collecting data for the tenant satisfaction measures (TSM's) ready for submission to the regulator in Summer 2024, these results will be published in Autumn 2024.  
The measures are intended to enable residents to scrutinise their landlord and hold them to account. The measures will also be used as a source of intelligence to the Regulator on whether landlords are meeting the regulatory standards. TSM's will be used alongside other tools to gain assurance that housing providers are providing good quality homes and services.  
The TSMs, which will be collected through tenant surveys and landlord data, will cover five main themes, including repairs, building safety, effective complaint-handling, respectful and helpful tenant engagement, and responsible neighbourhood management.  
The Group already have a pilot project underway to ensure readiness for the provision of data to the Regulator. The tenant surveys are being carried out by an independent organisation to allow for honesty and transparency.

## **4 Investment & Renewal**

- 4.1 Lambton Village Centre roof works are in progress.
- 4.2 Albany Village Centre garages. Gentoo were intending on demolishing the garages due to a structural assessment deeming the garages uneconomical to repair and that they were structurally unsafe. After submitting planning permission to demolish them we received an offer to purchase the garages and undertake the repairs to bring them back into occupation. Gentoo have accepted this offer and withdrawn our planning application. Residents wanted the garages to remain and this is a positive outcome, they will be modernised and rented out by the new owner.
- 4.3 Washington internal modernisations in Columbia, Biddick, Springwell Village and Fatfield including kitchens, bathrooms and rewiring works are in progress with 245 completed, 31 started and 199 to start, the programme is due to be completed by May 23.
- 4.4 The removal of Washington District Heating is ongoing; 330 installations of new Combi Boilers have been completed and 631 outstanding.

## **5. Recommendations**

- 5.1 Note the content of this report.

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