

Case Study 4.5

West Whitlawburn Housing Co-operative

Now in its 21st year, West Whitlawburn Housing Co-operative is a shining example of a community collectively addressing and taking control of their housing needs. With over 600 housing units and a waiting list of over 400 people seeking tenancy, WWHC has established itself as a highly regarded community institution and continues to successfully deliver services to its tenants through its unique ownership and governance structure.

Background

'We really had no choice, either continuing to live in unacceptable and deteriorating conditions or take control, seek housing grants from Scottish Homes and set about regenerating West Whitlawburn as an attractive, peaceful and high quality place to live.'

Phil Welsh, MBE, founding member of WWHC

West Whitlawburn is a local authority estate based in Cambuslang on the outskirts of Glasgow. Back in 1989, West Whitlawburn was an estate in need. Owned by it was an area with a reputation for social deprivation during the 1980's and residents spoke of their displeasure with the poor quality housing, repair services and general social issues rampant in the area. In 1989 the residents couldn't take anymore. A number of the more proactive tenants formed a steering group and took the courageous decision to purchase the 543 flats in the area from Glasgow City council, with the aid of over £12m in grants. With the tenants now having control over their housing needs, all that was left to do was to decide on a structure to manage the housing, one that was fair and ensured control would always rest with the tenants. Thus, West Whitlawburn Housing Co-operative (WWHC) was born.

Operations

WWHC is a Registered Social Landlord providing affordable housing primarily for those in society who are most in need. In contrast to most other forms of co-operatives, it is not for profit. This is to ensure that WWHC is considered a public benefit organisation to gain tax exemptions and government funding.

WWHC's remit is to develop, maintain and provide affordable housing to those who need it most. It has grown considerably since its inception in 1989 and now has over 600 housing units available to rent (see table 1). To date, it has spent over £48m improving the housing stock and the surrounding area and has 34 members of staff, not including volunteers who carry out vital work in the community.



Table 1-WWHC housing units

	1989	2010
Type	No. of Units	No. of Units
2 apartment multi storey flat	0	13
3 apartment multi storey flat	432	406
4 apartment multi storey flat	0	13
2 apartment low rise flat	0	3
2 apartment low rise flat	78	68
2 apartment low rise flat	30	41
2 apartment cottage flat	0	16
3 apartment house	0	50
4 apartment house	0	29
5 apartment house	0	5
Total	540	644

Source: WWHC 21st Anniversary Report to Members, 2010.

How WWHC functions as a co-operative

Legal Status

WWHC is registered under the Industrial and Provident Societies Act 1965.

Rules

The way in which WWHC is to conduct its business is set out in its rules. This document is a co-operative's articles of association. It states how the co-operative should deal with its membership, general meetings, management committee, audits etc.

Ownership

WWHC is a fully mutual housing co-operative, which means that every tenant is a member of the co-operative and only tenants can be members. This differs from other consumer co-operatives, such as retailers, where it is possible to buy products from the co-operative without being a



member. Therefore the tenants own and control the co-operative. For simplicity, each housing unit has one member, even though there might be a family of five residing in each unit. Ownership of the property is given to the tenant if he/she abides by the tenancy agreement and pays £1 to become a member of the co-operative. As long as those two requirements are met, the tenant is the owner of the property. The tenancy agreement does not grant members the right to purchase the housing unit and the co-op retains the unit after the tenancy agreement is ended. This concept of ownership is difficult for people to grasp as it differs from the traditional methods of owning property in that you own the property yet do not have the right to purchase it. As one member of staff put it, "How can you buy something that you already own?"

Governance

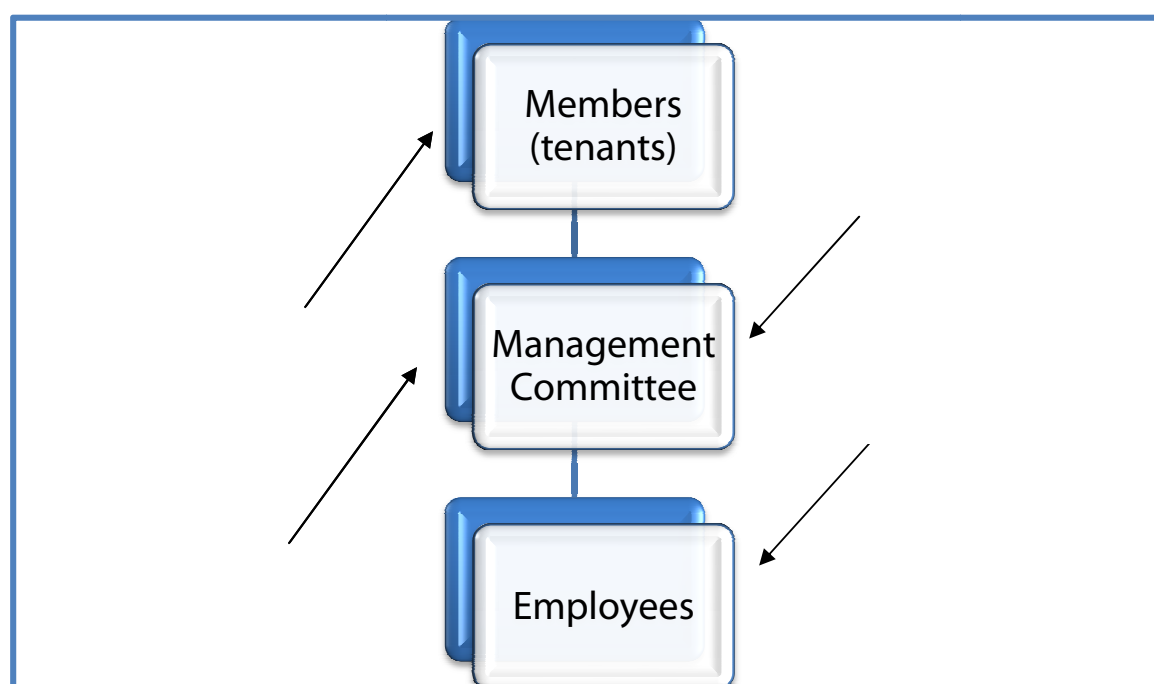
The highest governing body in WWHC is the management committee. Despite its name, the committee is populated by members of the co-operative (currently eleven) not members of staff. The management committee's role is to hire employees to efficiently and successfully manage the co-operative and to act in the best interests of the membership as a whole. Anyone who is a member of the co-operative can stand for election to the committee and members are voted in on a one member/one vote democratic process. In effect, the management committee fulfils the role of the board of directors in a conventional enterprise.

How the committee operates:

- The committee must have a minimum of seven members and a maximum of fifteen.
- An employee of the co-operative cannot become a committee member.
- One third of the committee must retire every year.
- Committee members can be removed if the majority of the members vote to do so.
- The committee must meet six times a year and the quorum for a meeting to be held is four.
- The committee will elect a chairperson, who has the deciding vote in matters of the committee.

The committee is responsible for directing the affairs of the co-operative and can use all of its powers to carry out its duties.



Figure 1-Governance structure of WWHC

A note on the distribution of profit: as previously stated, WWHC does not operate for profit and this is stipulated in its rules. However, it is still possible for the co-operative to generate a surplus due to operational costs being lower than expected. In this case, WWHC cannot distribute this surplus to the members (as in other co-ops) but reinvests it into the business.

Values & Principles

The co-operative Values & Principles are very important to WWHC and influence the operations and initiatives of the co-op. The management committee, in collaboration with the co-op's staff, have put each of the principles into practice:

Table 2-WWHC application of the Values & Principles

Voluntary and open membership	Anyone over the age of sixteen can join the waiting list of WWHC.
Democratic member control	The membership of the co-op consists of the all the tenants in the housing. Every member is equal (one vote) and can be elected to the highest governing body in the co-op, the committee.
Member economic participation	Tenants must pay £1 to become a member of the co-op. This contribution cannot increase in



	value or be transferred.
Autonomy and independence	WWHC is independent from the local council and is in complete control of its operations.
Education, training and information	Any member wishing to stand on the committee is provided with training so they can participate effectively in meetings and make strategic decisions. WWHC provides a free copy of its annual report available to all its members.
Co-operation amongst co-operatives	WWHC has made links with other co-operatives throughout the UK and further afield. WWHC also works with a housing co-op in Malawi to share best practice and experience.
Concern for community	WWHC has introduced a number of social and environmental initiatives aimed at improving the community. The co-op built a resource centre with a cafe, youth club, computer facilities and an out of school care service. WWHC also employs a number of local residents to run these services.



Social benefits

WWHC is more than just a landlord. It adheres to the co-operative values and principles, particularly principle number seven, and its status as a Registered Social Housing provider means that WWHC takes its social responsibilities very seriously.

Every couple of years, WWHC conducts a Tenant Satisfaction Survey to ascertain the level of satisfaction tenants have with the services provided.

Table 3-Tenant satisfaction survey

	2004	2006	2008
Tenants Surveyed	20%	16%	12%
The Co-operative as a Landlord Percentage of tenants who are satisfied with the Co-operative as a landlord	96%	99%	100%
Quality of Services Percentage of tenants who are satisfied with the overall quality of the services provided by the Co-operative.	87%	98%	100%
Advice and Assistance Percentage of tenants who are satisfied with the quality of advice and assistance that they receive from the Co-operative.	91%	96%	97%
Concierge Service and Security System Percentage of tenants who are satisfied with concierge services the repairs service.	80%	92%	98%
Repairs Service Percentage of tenants who are satisfied with the repairs service.	80%	90%	93%
Value for Money 5.5% of tenants do not believe that their rent represents good value for money.	76%	86%	94%
The Neighbourhood Percentage of tenants who believe that West Whitlawburn is a	86%	N/A	91%



good area to live in.			
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Source: Tenant Satisfaction Survey Summary 2007/8

Additional Services

In 1995, WWHC acquired funding from the National Lottery Charities Board and constructed the West Whitlawburn Community Resource Centre. The centre acts as a hub for the local community and provides vital services such as:

- Out of School Care Service for the children of parents who work during the day.
- Cafe
- Citizens Advice outreach centre
- Two youth clubs

Perhaps most important is the concierge service provided by the co-operative. With over 140 CCTV cameras and 67 house alarms for elderly and infirm tenants, the concierge ensure that West Whitlawburn is a safe and secure place for members to reside.

Future plans

WWHC has recently completed building an additional 100 housing units and its objectives for the foreseeable future are focused on ensuring the co-operative remains solvent, sustainable and most importantly, continues to provide a service that is in the best interest of its members. WWHC has also supported the establishment of a separate co-operative to provide communications service (namely broadband and phone) to the residents of WWHC.¹

¹ Whitcomm Co-operative Ltd.

