ADULTS AND HOUSING SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
31 MARCH 2015

ITEM NO. ....6............

CHANGES TO THE STRUCTURES OF
CUSTOMER ENGAGEMENT IN HOUSING SERVICES

SUMMARY REPORT

Purpose of the Report

1. To set out proposals for changes to the way customers engage in the planning and delivery of housing services.

Summary

2. The approach that the Council has taken to customer engagement has proved to be largely successful. However, in recent years there have been a number of significant developments that are driving the need for changes.

3. The development of digital technology is changing the way people choose to communicate, with the use of social media growing very significantly. This opens another means of communication, particularly with younger people who are underrepresented in the current model of engagement. We also know that changes in life style and work patterns are having an impact on when people can get involved and what they are interested in and this further challenges us to find new flexible ways of involvement. Probably the most significant long term change is in the way that communities deal with change. In order to cope with the economic and social changes that are taking place communities have to become more self-reliant. Housing is in a particularly good position to help with the building of community resilience in the areas where it is the major landlord.

4. The new structure comprises of three areas that incorporate or redesign some existing functions.

    (a) **Scrutiny:** 3 separate Panels will be established: a new Customer Panel, a Scrutiny Panel, and a Complaints Panel. The latter two already exist. The panels will be independent of each other.

    (b) **Customer Voice:** this introduces a number of different forms of participation ranging from a virtual forum for all tenants to a specific forum for younger people. It also introduces a new role of Neighbourhood Ambassadors and an enhanced role for Mystery Shoppers. Task and Finish Groups will be established that will address specific issues. The aim is to grow the virtual housing forum (Housing Connect) to include about 5% of all Housing Services customers and this will be the pool from which volunteers will be sought to support other activities.

(c) **Community Participation:** This focuses on work with local communities and is intended to help to build community resilience. The focus is on harnessing the energy and commitment within communities to help them help themselves. A Community Fund has been set up that community groups can bid to for grants of up to a £1000. A number of Tenants and Residents Associations already exist and this will provide the opportunity to develop more and link them into the engagement process.

5. The review took place in partnership with the Tenants' Board. It was recognised from the outset that the review should be conducted jointly providing the Board with a number of opportunities to engage in developing these proposals.

Recommendation

6. Members comments are sought on the content of this report.

Paul Wildsmith
Director of Neighbourhood Services and Resources

Background Papers

Regulatory Framework for Social Housing in England from 2012

Ken Davies: Extension 5955

MAIN REPORT

Introduction

7. The aim of the review was to consider how we engage with our customers in the future and the means by which we do this. The previous approach to customer engagement has largely proved to be successful to-date. However, a number of significant developments are now driving the need for change.

8. The current structure (as shown in Figure 1 below) is headed by the Housing Executive which overviews all customer engagement activity and provides support and direction.   The Tenant's Board is the conduit through which most activities are channelled. This is supported by a Scrutiny Panel and a Complaints Panel which draws on members of the Tenants' Board. There are a number of subsidiary groups and there is a resource of about 50 customers who are drawn on for these activities.

Fig 1: Current Tenant Empowerment Structure
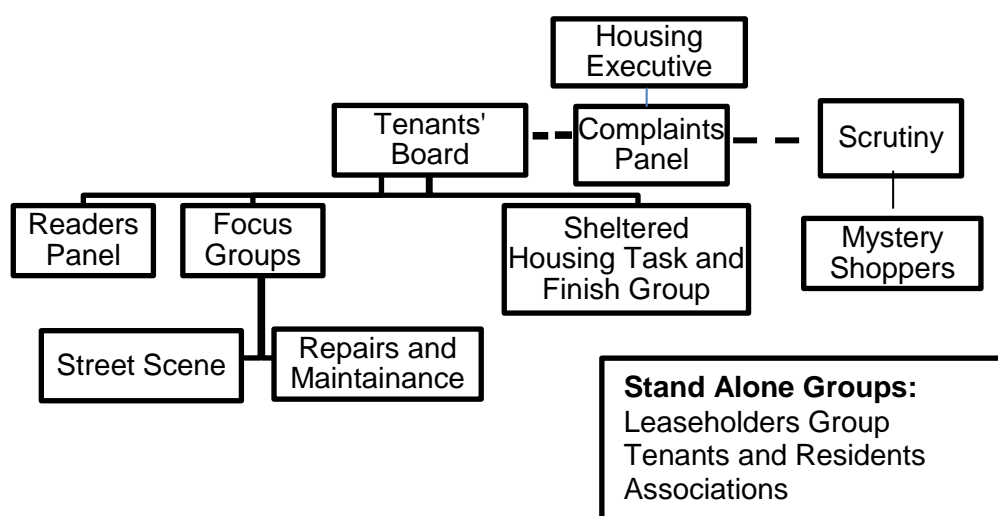
9. In developing the new structures we looked at best practice from other housing providers, local initiatives such as Darlington HealthWatch and also reflected on our regulatory requirements. In particular a number of principles have been developed that can be adopted:

    (a) The purpose of participation is to improve services for our customers and is not an end in itself. It should form a critical part of our strategic decision making.

    (b) The processes should be dynamic reflecting changing needs and expectations and the participation structures should also be expected to continually change as well.

    (c) We need to retain exiting channels of communication that are effective and add new ones that increase levels of participation. In making the shift towards the use of digital technology we need to protect the interest of those customers who cannot make use of this option.

    (d) There is a need to draw on a wide range of customer experience that will cut across all service areas. We need to ensure that our approach is inclusive.

    (e) No Customer group should have to go through another group to access decision makers.

    (f) No one who volunteers should be out of pocket because of it.
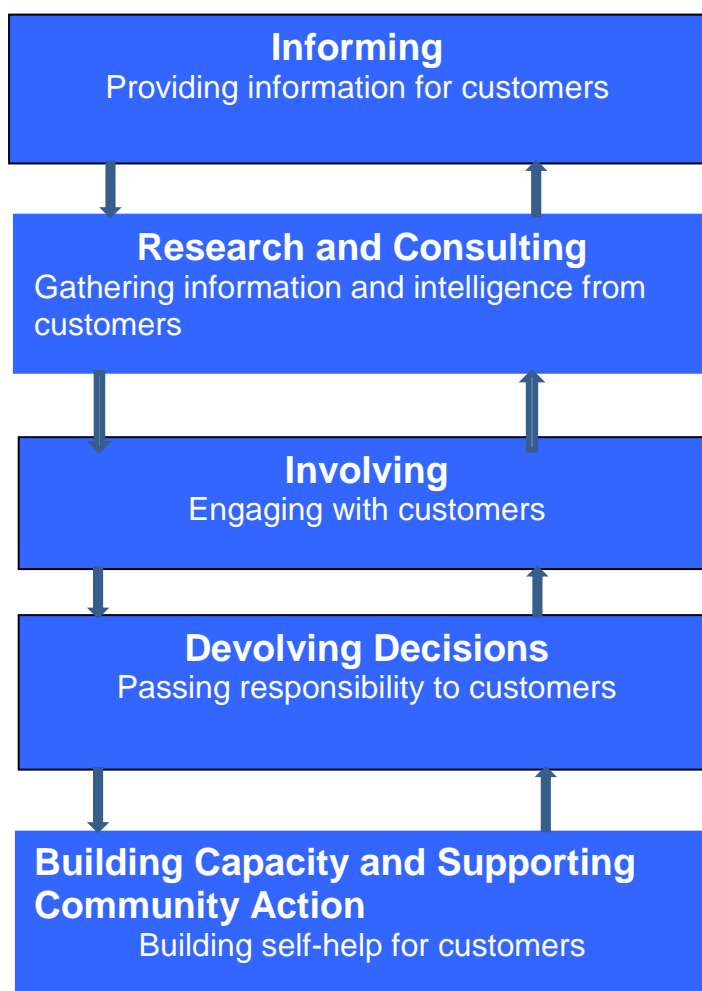
Objectives

10. The following objectives have been identified:

    (a) Ensure that we have the right participation processes in place that meet tenants' expectations and support the development of housing services.

(b) We need to satisfy the Homes and Communities Agency regulatory requirements[1].

(c) Customers should have a level of opportunity to engage that meets the level of commitment they want to make.

(d) To establish a range of means of communications with housing customers that meet their needs and help improve housing services. In particular we need to explore the growing use of social media and the internet.

(e) Clarify what forms of participation will take place and the roles that they play.

(f) Engage with underrepresented groups and in particular young people.

(g) Increase the number of customers who are participating

11. Our commitment to our customers is shown at Figure 2.
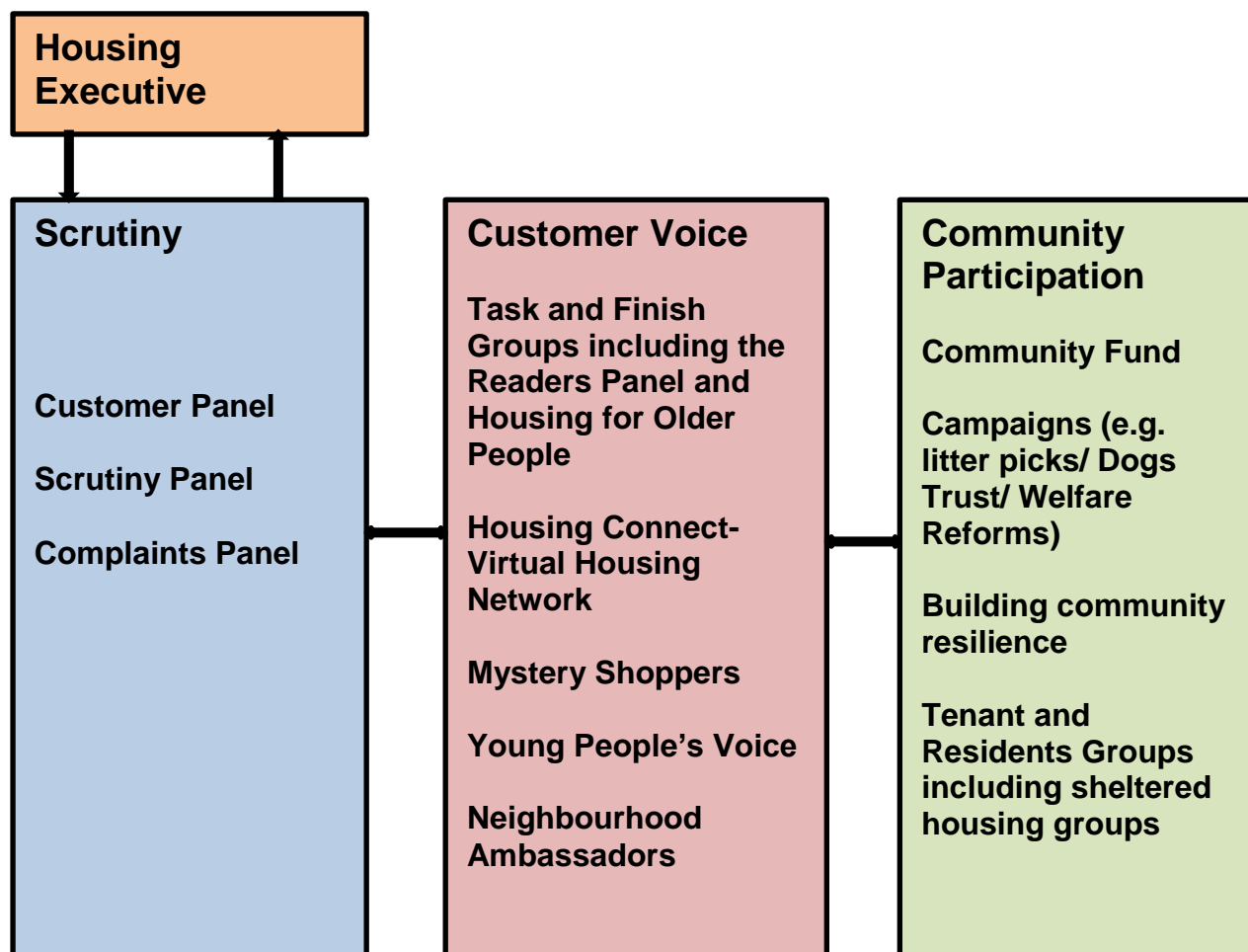
Fig 2: Customer Commitment

Informing
Providing information for customers

Research and Consulting
Gathering information and intelligence from customers

Involving
Engaging with customers

Devolving Decisions
Passing responsibility to customers

Building Capacity and Supporting Community Action
Building self-help for customers

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[1] Regulatory Framework for Social Housing in England from 2012

Proposed Future Structure

12. We can group participation into three distinct areas of activity as shown at Figure 3.

Fig 3: Types of engagement

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┌─────────────────┐
│ Housing         │
│ Executive       │
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Scrutiny	Customer Voice	Community Participation
Customer Panel Scrutiny Panel Complaints Panel	Task and Finish Groups including the Readers Panel and Housing for Older People Housing Connect-Virtual Housing Network Mystery Shoppers Young People's Voice Neighbourhood Ambassadors	Community Fund Campaigns (e.g. litter picks/ Dogs Trust/ Welfare Reforms) Building community resilience Tenant and Residents Groups including sheltered housing groups

13. Details of the roles within the new structure are provided in Appendix 1. As well as an ambitious plan to build a broad base of customer engagement a key aim is to build community resilience.   Community resilience is about how people living in a particular place deal with economic, social and environmental challenges. Going beyond merely coping, resilient communities can actually become stronger and more adaptable over time as they adjust to the problems they face. This could be by acquiring new skills, strengthening social connections and developing new physical resources. This way of thinking about communities and resilience – their inherent strengths, flexibility and resources – implies that a resilient community might also be a more sociable, inspiring and sustainable place to live. Joseph Rowntree Trust suggested these actions were critical to building community resilience :

(a) Tapping into the existing interests of community groups and making use of their social networks was one of the most valuable ways to engage and reach out to people.

(b) The greatest successes involved linking to people's interests and working with the local schools. By engaging pupils messages could reach the wider community.

(c) It is vital to build trust among residents so that outside help could be reduced and responsibilities could become embedded in the community.

(d) Helping people to forge new social links as well as reinforcing existing connections made the community stronger and better placed to affect change and become more resilient.

Set out in Fig 4 are the strengths that are needed:

Fig 4: Strengths and characteristics that contribute to community resilience

14. In adopting these principles we would be following an approach known as "asset based community development". It recognises people as having skills and experience that are assets to the community and is the exact opposite of popular commentaries that personify people in terms of problems. Work is due to commence shortly at Redhall to develop a Neighbourhood Renewal Strategy that is intended to develop this type of approach. A second initiative in Cockerton is taking

place after the regeneration of the Minors Crescent area to build links within the community. The approach is slightly different to Redhall but the intention is the same.

Transition

15. The following has been agreed regarding the transition to the new structure:

    (a) The transition to the new structure will begin in April. A detailed plan has been agreed with the Board. It will see the Board dissolved in June as the new structures are introduced.

    (b) 50% of the new Panels will be made up of existing Board members while the remainder will be made up of new recruits.

    (c) The Tenants' Board will need to continue to function until the new Panels are functional
    .
    (d) Establishing the Customer Voice will form a step change in participation but this will take most time.

Appendix 1: Future Structure

Housing Executive

1. The Housing Executive will play an important role in supporting the work across Customer Engagement:

(a) It will oversee all community engagement activity.

(b) Provide support, direction and guidance.

(c) Ensure appropriate officer resources are available to support customer engagement activities.

(d) Approve the Community Engagement budget including Community Fund application.

(e) Participate in the selection of Panel members.

(f) The Housing Executive will meet a minimum of 6 times per year.

2. The Housing Executive will consist of the chairs of the three Panels plus the Assistant Director Housing and Building Services, Head of Housing and the Customer Engagement Manager.

Scrutiny

3. Scrutiny is an overarching term used to describe a group of three Panels. Each one will be independent of each other and membership will be restricted to one Panel broadening the base of customers who can be involved.

Customer Panel

4. The overall focus will be on the housing service and the delivery of the Housing Business Plan:

(a) The Panel will hold the Council to account for delivery of the service objectives, performance, customer satisfaction and inequalities in service delivery.

(b) It will provide an informed view on the challenges facing tenants. They can establish time limited Task and Finish Groups to support this activity.

(c) It will provide advice on policy and service development.

(d) It can suggest areas for Scrutiny to consider as part of that programme.

(e) The Panel will meet a minimum of 6 times per year.

(f) Membership will be for a maximum of five years:

(i)   The Customer Panel can have up to 11members initially

(ii)   Half the membership may eventually be nominated from local areas. Half the membership will be by open invitation. Selection will be by application and interview carried out by members of the Housing Executive.

(iii)   Members cannot participate in other Scrutiny Groups but can participate in the Customer Voice and Community Participation groups

(iv)   The Chair and Vice Chair will be elected by the Customer Panel annually

(v)   The Chair of the Customer panel will be a member of the Housing Executive

Scrutiny Panel

5.   This function is a regulatory requirement and therefore the role is shaped by this

(a) The Panel will agree an annual review programme of two reviews and where there is a joint interest in a subject a review can be conducted jointly with Adults and Housing Scrutiny Committee.

(b) Reviews will be treated as projects and conducted over an agreed period drawing on the resources available in the Customer Voice and from Council Officers.

(c) Project Plans will need to be agreed with the Executive to confirm the commitment of resources.

(d) Results of reviews will be reported to Adults and Scrutiny committee.

(e) Time commitments will be based on the needs of each project

(f) The membership will be a maximum of 11

(i)   Membership will be by open invitation through the Customer Voice and retiring members of other Scrutiny groups. Selection will be by application and interview.

(ii)   Membership will be for a period of five years.

(iii)   The Chair of the Scrutiny Panel will be a member of the Executive. Currently the role of chair rotates. In the future the chair will oversee the role of the Panel but there will be an opportunity for individual panel members to lead particular projects and this will form part of the project plan.

Complaints Panel

6. This is a regulatory requirement and forms part of the Council's Complaints process:

    (a) There will be no change to its current function

    (b) The panel will meet when required

    (c) The membership will be a maximum of 5

      (i)   Membership will be by open invitation to the Customer Voice and retiring members of other Scrutiny groups. Selection will be by application and interview.

      (ii) Membership will be for a period of five years.

      (iii) The Chair of the Complaints Panel will be a member of the Executive

Customer Voice

7. We want to create a number of different types of opportunities for tenants to become involved. As well as broadening the base of tenants who are involved we also want to focus on local areas and particular groups of tenants such as younger people who are currently under represented. We want to ensure that we have an inclusive approach to involving customers.

8. Broad participation will provide vital information on the way we should be delivering services and how successful we are at doing this. It should provide key information that will help to drive the Housing Business Plan and help us achieve our goals. Any customers including those involved in Scrutiny can be involved in these activities

Housing Connect

9. We recognise that particularly for those who are working and for many younger people attending a meeting may not be an attractive option. We also recognise that increasingly people are choosing digital as their favoured means of communication. We therefore intend to create a digital option that will allow tenants to participate from their home and at a time they would choose. They may be asked to fill in surveys or comment on proposals or pass on observations about their area or services. They will also be able to choose what topics they participate in. We will use this as an opportunity to explore the various forms of social media and its effectiveness. We hope that some of these customers will want to become more involved in the future and provide a resource to the Scrutiny Panels. We should

aim for a base of 5% of tenants forming Housing Connect by the end of 2015 with a new target being set for the end of 2016.

Neighbourhood Ambassadors

10. Linking to Housing Connect these are customers who want to participate by passing comment on the delivery of housing services in their Neighbourhood. The aim is to develop a way for individual customers (or groups) to provide comment on how they are experiencing services in their area. They can go further than providing comment. They can, for example, organise customer led estate inspections or participate in Police led Community Audits or organise litter picks.

Task and Finish Groups

11. These are project groups that will be commissioned to carry out specific tasks or act as focus groups. For example they may be asked to consider changes in demand or help support the development of a new policy. They will be supported by a Housing Officer and will be commissioned as and when they are required. Some Task and Finish groups will cover themes for example Repairs and Maintenance, Readers Panels, and Housing for Older People. The membership of these groups will change as they move from project to project within the theme.

12. Invites to participate will be made to those registered with Housing Connect and will be for the duration of the specific task. Information on the level of commitment required and support to be provided will be explicit in the invite.

13. Project Plans will need to be agreed with the Executive to confirm the commitment of resources.

14. Task and Finish Groups will normally be made up of up to 11 customers but there will need to be some flexibility to take account of the different types of tasks.

Mystery Shoppers

15. There is a well-established and successful group who carry out mystery shopping. They have assisted in policy development and scrutiny. Both these roles will continue.

16. Mystery Shoppers will also be recruited from Housing Connect. They will work directly with the Customer participation team to retain their anonymity.

Young People's Voice

17. There is a very noticeable gap in the number of people under the age of 25 who engage and this presents a particular challenge. We know that they are the most likely to make use of social media and effective communication with this group may mean a significant change in style. We need to be flexible about the way we approach this challenge. The Young People's Voice is likely to be a virtual group but it may also include meetings and events...

18. Membership will be restricted to young people who either live in Council property or live on Council estates

19. At this stage no limits will be set on the numbers who can get involved and no formal structure is proposed.

Community Fund

20. This fund provides an opportunity for local groups to bids for funds to enable various community activities. Grants will be of up to £1000 and must demonstrate that the proposal will support activities that genuinely make a difference to the lives of the community on Council estates.

Campaigns (e.g. Litter picks/ Welfare Reforms)

21. There are a number of one off short and long campaigns that have been identified that are either on going or in the process of development. In some cases the need for a campaign comes from the local community while others are Darlington wide and are likely to be driven by external change such as the introduction of Welfare Reforms. It is important to recognise that these types of activities offer the best opportunities for participation. A number of studies have found that where there is a clear and immediate benefit to the local community people are more likely to participate. These activities are important as they can build links within communities that become important in establishing more sustained interest in the wellbeing of the community.

22. An important element of this approach is recognising what already exists, for example, Street Champions and Neighbourhood Watch. Making links to ensure that community resources are linked should aid effective participation for new and existing campaigns.

Tenant and Residents Groups

23. We already have a number of Tenant and Resident Groups and are working with communities in Cockerton and Redhall which should see the first stage of growth in these types of groups. These groups will have a natural link to Customer's Voice activities. These groups will link to local Housing Officers and we hope that they will eventually have the opportunity to nominate a representative to be part of the Customer Panel creating a link between the borough wide group and local communities. It is recognised that some communities there are already meetings taking place such as Partnership meetings and so the development of Tenants and Residents groups will be flexible focusing on what works for the community.

24. There are also groups in all of the Council's sheltered schemes. They largely focus on social activities but some play wider roles. Some of those active in these groups may wish to participate in Task and Finish Groups, particularly related to Housing for Older People.