

CUSTOMER ENGAGEMENT IN HOUSING SERVICES

SUMMARY REPORT

Purpose of the Report

1. This report updates Members on the way the Council engages with its housing tenants and leaseholders and the future direction of travel.

Summary

2. The Council's current structures for engaging with tenants and leaseholders has been in place since 2015. It is a regulatory requirement that these structures are reviewed every three years and the aim is that a review will be completed by March 2019.
3. The current formal structures of tenant engagement are through a number of Panels made up of volunteers. In recent years, like most other social housing providers, we have found it increasingly difficult to recruit to these formal structures. Increasingly, a shift to a greater use of social media suggest that other channels for communications and engagement are required to either supplement or replace current mechanisms.
4. However, success in engaging with communities such as Red Hall as part of the Healthy New Town Initiative on a broader community agenda also suggests that a stronger community base to consultation needs to develop alongside increased use of digital means of engagement.
5. The delivery of this review is very likely to be affected by the Government's Housing Green Paper which was published in the summer and largely focuses on the future role of tenant involvement in light of the Grenfell Tower Fire. The Government intend to strengthen regulations for engagement to ensure that tenants are more involved in decision making, particularly around health and safety and service provision. They are also considering introducing new Key Performance indicators as well as "league tables" to help tenants compare performance with other housing organisations. The new Social Housing Regulator will lead the changes which are not likely to be fully implemented for up to two years.
6. The review will involve consulting with tenants and leaseholders and also considering the way other Social Housing providers engage. The aim is to work with the Tenant's Customer and Scrutiny Panels to develop options for how we engage in the future, taking into account the likely impact of the Green Paper.
7. It is proposed that the final recommendations are brought to a joint meeting with this Scrutiny Committee and the Panel representatives in the March 2019

Recommendation

8. It is recommended that :-
- (a) Members consider the contents of this report and any involvement they wish to have in the review.
 - (b) A joint meeting between the Adults and Housing Scrutiny Committee and the Tenant's Panels is held in March 2019.

Ian Williams
Director of Economic Growth and
Neighbourhood Services

Background Papers

- A new deal for Social Housing: Government Green Paper 2018
- Tenant Involvement and Empowerment Standard: Homes and Communities Agency 2017

Ken Davies – Ext 5955

S17 Crime and Disorder	There are no direct implications
Health and Well Being	There are no implications
Carbon Impact	There is no direct carbon impact
Diversity	There is unlikely to be a direct impact
Wards Affected	All with Council Housing
Groups Affected	Council tenants and leaseholders
Budget and Policy Framework	There are no implications
Key Decision	No
Urgent Decision	No
One Darlington: Perfectly Placed	There are no implications
Efficiency	There are none at this stage
Impact on Looked After Children and Care Leavers	There are no implications

MAIN REPORT

Information and Analysis

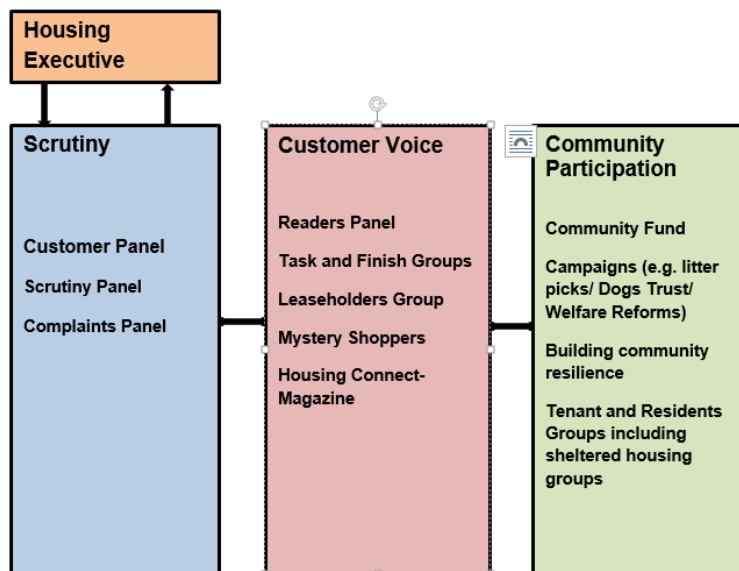
9. Social Housing is now regulated by the newly created Social Housing Regulator. This function was previously delivered by the Homes and Communities Agency but with the change of name to Homes England the Government took the opportunity to split regulation and monitoring from the development and funding functions. The main area of regulation covering Local Authorities is the Consumer Standard. This sets out four standards including the Tenant Involvement and Empowerment Standard that covers requirements for engaging with tenants and leaseholders and also the requirement for a complaints process. The Standard requires that:

“Registered providers shall consult tenants at least once every three years on the best way of involving tenants in the governance and scrutiny of the organisation’s housing management service”.

10. The last review took place in 2015 and therefore another review is now underway.

Current Engagement Structure

11. The current formal structure of tenant and leaseholder engagement consists of:



- (a) Housing Executive is formed by the Chairs of the panels and takes an overview of the service;
- (b) Customer Panel addresses policy matters and customer engagement approach;
- (c) Scrutiny Panel reviews the quality and value for money of various aspects of the housing service; and
- (d) The Complaints Panel sits within the Council’s formal complaints structure but also acts as the “democratic filter” required within housing regulation.

12. The number of volunteers who are involved with these formal groups has continued to decline despite a number of different methods of recruitment being tried. It is a trend that other housing providers are also reporting. This is due to a mix of factors such as changes in life styles and the inconvenience of attending meetings, but also tenants seem to prefer to be actively involved in their community instead.

13. There are a number of successful, less formal groups such as :

- (a) The Readers Panel that helps to produce the tenant’s magazine, Housing Connect and reviews housing documents and leaflets to ensure that they are in plain English and accessible for tenants.

- (b) The Mystery Shoppers provide insight into how services are being delivered by testing various aspects of services.
 - (c) The Leaseholder Group meet annually to discuss matters affecting them.
 - (d) Task and Finish groups are used on an ad hoc basis
14. The Housing Connect magazine is currently delivered to tenants and leaseholders' quarterly providing information and news about the service and community activities. The magazine was revamped in 2016 resulting in increased readership. Experiments have been conducted in setting up a separate website specifically to engage tenants, however, little interest was shown and consequently more use of mainstream social media is being piloted.
15. A significant part of the work has focused on community participation where there are opportunities for large scale engagement based on a much wider agenda of community interest. An example of this is the work in Red Hall and more recently the work in Cockerton where involvement has been around a wide range of issues such as the development of play areas and gardening. These are areas where large numbers of tenants have been involved in activities and will continue to be a focus of action.

Housing Green Paper

16. The Government published a Housing Green paper in summer 2018 that is likely to have a significant impact on future customer engagement. The Green Paper is largely a response to the impact of the Grenfell Tower fire tragedy and focuses on the issues that have emerged. In the development of the Green Paper in the Autumn of 2017 and again in 2018 tenants from Darlington were involved directly in consultation forums with the previous and current Housing Minister.
17. The Paper considers how to ensure tenants are properly involved in decisions concerning safety. It also considers complaints processes and if there is a need to speed up the process. In particular it suggests that the "Democratic Filter" stage could be removed to speed up access to the Ombudsman service. In Darlington this stage is fulfilled by the tenant's Complaints Panel but can include Councillors or the MP.
18. The Green Paper's major focus is on how tenants can make an assessment of the quality and efficiency of housing services. There is a suggestion that there could be more transparency through the reintroduction of Key Performance Indicators and the publication of league tables that would include Housing Association as well as Local Authority providers. The Government have indicated that Neighbourhood Management would be an important area of performance. There is also a suggestion that tenants could become more involved in decisions concerning choosing contractors.

The Review

19. The review needs to consider the changing expectations of tenants and leaseholders and in particular the lack of enthusiasm for attending meetings as a means of getting involved.
20. The increasing use of digital systems for tenants to manage their tenancies may present an opportunity to open up new means of engaging tenants. This may create ways of seeking opinions and gathering feedback that will become a valuable element of future service planning and scrutiny. Also the growth in social media as a main means of communications for many presents a number of opportunities to open new means of engagement while community participation will continue to be a key priority.
21. Members of this Committee have indicated previously that they are interested in working more closely with Tenants Groups and may wish to be involved in this review.

Consultation

22. Members of the Customer and Scrutiny panel have formed a joint group to work alongside Officers throughout the review.
23. A survey concerning customer involvement was included in the November edition of Housing Connect **See Appendix 1** and this was also available on line and to any tenants visiting the Town Hall to ensure that as many tenants as possible are able to have an input.