

REVIEW OF CUSTOMER ENGAGEMENT

SUMMARY REPORT

Purpose of the Report

1. This report set out the results of a review of customer engagement in housing and the proposed changes that result from it.

Summary

2. The Council have had the current structures for engaging with their tenants and leaseholders in place since 2015. It is a regulatory requirement that these structures are reviewed every three years and therefore a review was commissioned in 2018.
3. The review has identified that further changes need to be made to the model of engagement to reflect changing attitudes towards consultation and involvement. A survey conducted in November (**Appendix 1**) through Housing Connect found that 65% of tenants said they would be interested in being involved but the vast majority of those would prefer to engage through digital means. This was supported by a shorter survey conducted in Red Hall in December.
4. A further factor influencing the review is the extent that tenants now have access to digital means of communications. The survey found that 72% of tenants had access to the internet. When this is placed in the context of a long term decline in interest in engagement through formal structures it is clear that a shift towards more digital means of communications is necessary. We will still need to retain some formal structures of consultation as they play an important role in decision making and scrutiny but more use will be made of such tools as digital surveys and social media to engage with tenants. It is therefore proposed that the number of Tenant Panels is consolidated and the scale of digital communications increased.
5. Another strong element that came out of the survey was tenant's interest in their local area. We know from work within local communities that we can attract large numbers of tenants to one off events and also that groups of tenants are keen to work together on specific areas of interest. This sets out an approach to engagement at a local level that will be tested this year through a programme of engagement in local communities.
6. The main type of communication with tenants has been through the Housing Connect. The change in design which took place in 2016 has seen an improvement in readership but it is estimated that still less than 40% of tenants read this. It is therefore proposed that this is reduced from 4 issues a year to 2, supplemented with more use of digital communication methods.

7. It is proposed that changes will begin being implemented in April 2019 and be completed by March 2020.

Recommendation

8. It is recommended that Member note the proposed changes to the customer engagement model in housing.

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

Pauline Mitchell: Extension 5832

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 also 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:

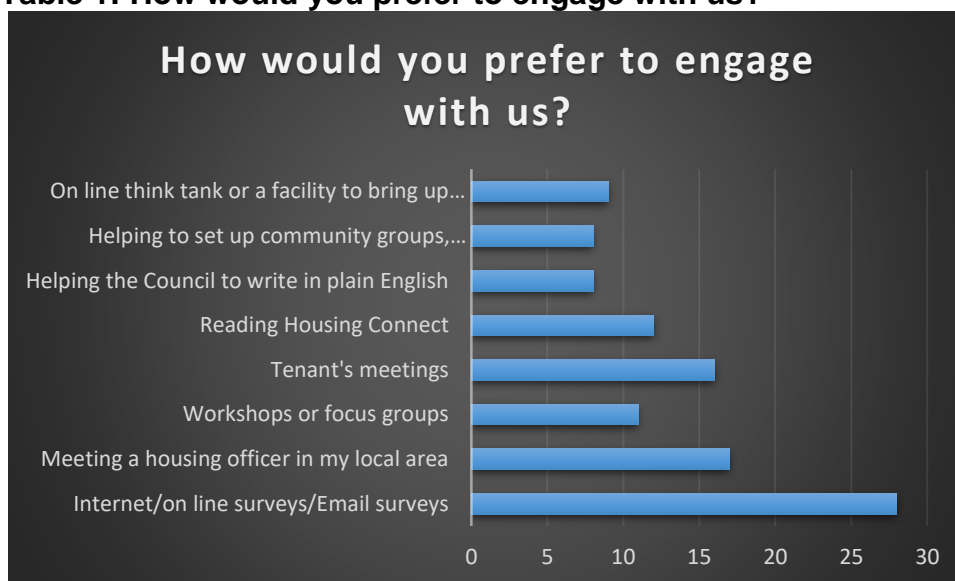
“Registered providers shall consult tenants at least once every three years on the best way of involving tenants in the governance and scrutiny of the organisation’s housing management service.”

10. A review began in the summer of 2018 involving members of the Tenant Customer and Scrutiny panels and included:
 - (a) Benchmarking customer engagement process with other providers
 - (b) Workshop with tenants to evaluate the current structure
 - (c) Two surveys of tenants to understand their interest in getting more involved
 - (d) Analysis of the Housing Green paper and any potential impacts.

11. The review found that recruitment of tenants to the current structure has proved increasingly difficult. It has become clear that changes in lifestyles and expectations have made attendance at formal meetings less attractive. This is a situation that has emerged with most housing providers who have found it increasingly difficult to recruit volunteers to formal meetings, particularly working age tenants.

12. A survey that was conducted through Housing Connect in November 2018 (Appendix 1) confirmed that across a range of choices engaging through various digital means had the largest support. This was supported by a second survey carried out in Red Hall:

Table 1: How would you prefer to engage with us?

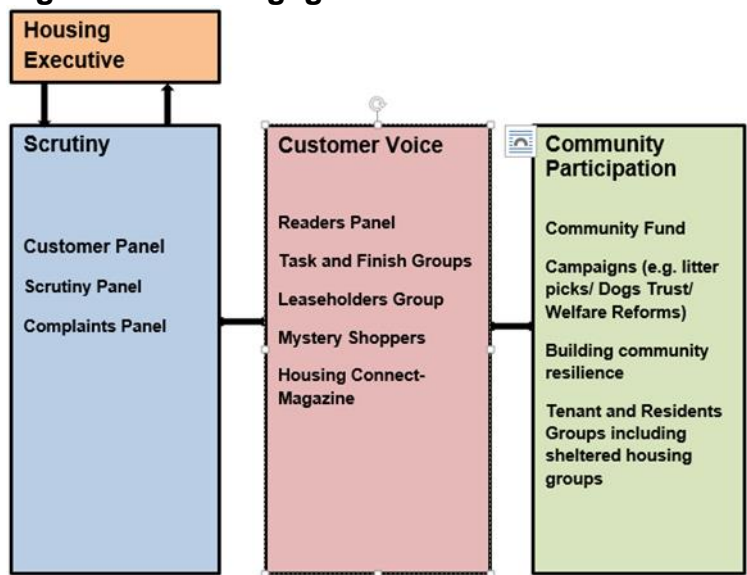


13. The survey also found that 72% of tenants now have access to the internet. This is a significant increase over recent years and supports the finding for choosing digital as a preferred means of engagement. The review therefore concluded that in order to meet the challenges set out in the Housing Green Paper¹ of involving tenants more in decision making it would be essential to shift the balance of engagement towards digital. This would not mean that formal structures were no longer necessary but that they could be better focused and concentrated into fewer groups.

¹ A New Deal for Social Housing: Housing Green Paper MCLG 2018

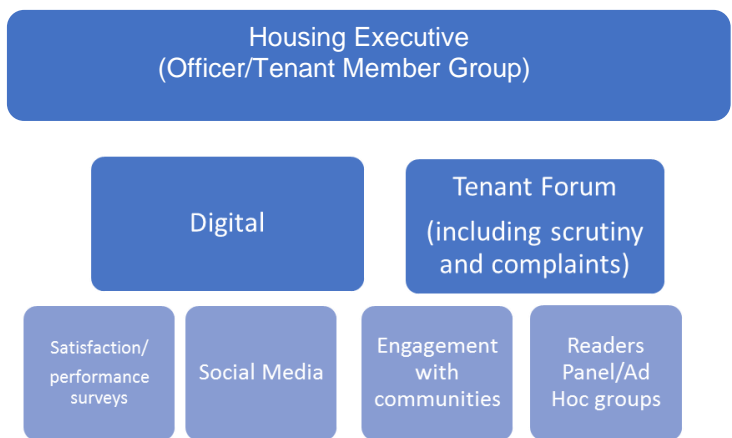
14. The current structure of engagement is set out below:

Fig 1: Current Engagement Structure



15. It is proposed that the following structure be adopted:

Fig 2: Future Structure of Engagement



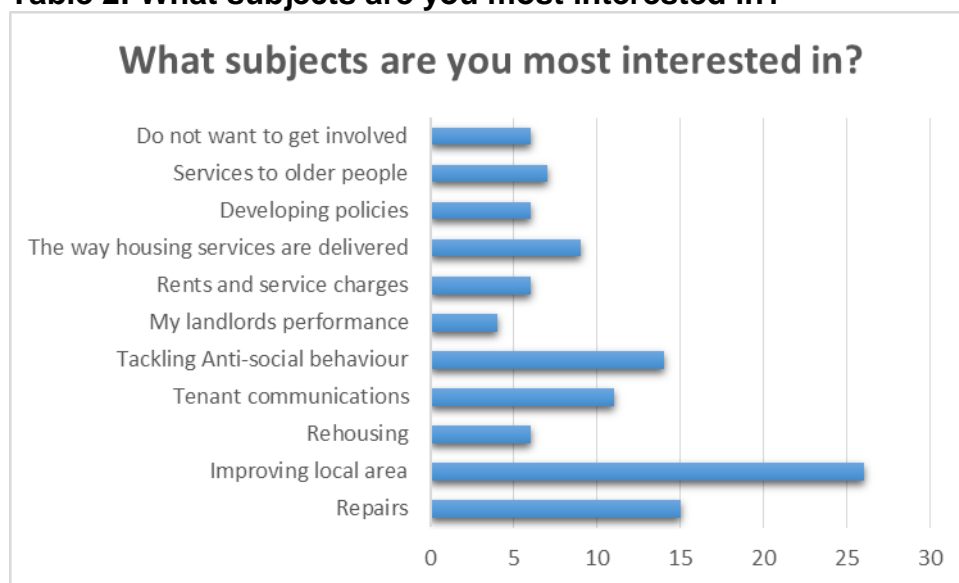
16. It is proposed that the current scrutiny structure be merged into a single tenant group as this will create a group with sufficient numbers to be effective and it will aid coordination of activities. The agenda will include scrutiny as well as policy and performance. The Complaints Panel has not met for three years due to lack of demand. Consequently, should a panel be needed it will be drawn from members of the Forum. Other active groups such as the Readers Panel, Leaseholders Group and the Mystery shoppers will be retained as separate groups.

17. The growth in the use of digital means of communications coincides with the introduction of the new Digital Tenancy which will give tenants the convenience of managing their tenancies from their home and at any time. This will include reporting repairs and checking their rent account. This development opens the door to new channels of communications with tenants and in particular the use of satisfaction surveys and the delivery of information. Alongside this it is proposed that the use of social media is significantly increased. Facebook and Twitter are already used but more use will be made going forward. They are particularly useful for recording various events such as Christmas celebrations in sheltered schemes

but they can also be used for promotion and in some circumstances for consultation.

18. The main type of communication at the moment is Housing Connect. Although readership has improved from 20% of tenants since the format changes it is still only read by a minority of tenants despite it being delivered to every tenant and leaseholder quarterly. It is proposed to reduce the number of editions down to two and shift the content away from recording social events, which will move to social media, and focus the magazine on providing key information to tenants.
19. Another area of development is work within the community. The survey noted that the area tenants were most interested in being engaged with is their local community:

Table 2: What subjects are you most interested in?



20. Work in communities such as Red Hall and Cockerton, as well as, the success of the Haughton and Lascelles Residents Associations strongly indicate that a more focused approach to engagement within local communities will create opportunities for engagement. It is therefore proposed that this summer a range of events will be organised that will provide an opportunity for members of the community to come together in informal events where there will be an opportunity to engage with housing services. The intention is to organise one event in each of the housing management areas and to use this as an opportunity to find out what future local opportunities there are to engage.
21. It is proposed that implementation of the changes to the formal structures will take place in April with progress on delivery being monitored by the Tenant's Forum.

Outcome of Consultation

22. Two tenant surveys were conducted seeking views on engagement and the outcomes of these have influenced the proposed changes. The tenants involved in the Customer and Scrutiny Panels have been engaged at each stage of the process and all the tenants who are involved in the formal consultation processes were given the opportunity to be involved and comment.