

HOUSING PANEL (PANEL OF THE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE)

Monday 11 April 2016

COUNCILLOR PANEL MEMBERS PRESENT: Councillors Sanders, Wade and Smith (Chair)

TENANT SCRUTINY PANEL MEMBERS PRESENT: Geno Humphrey (Chair), Celia Matthews, Hashim Ahmed, Steve Speight and Brenda Walton.

BOARD MEMBERS PRESENT: Councillor Rowley

OFFICERS PRESENT: Andrew Brown (Scrutiny Officer), Simon Warde (Tenant Involvement Manager) and Bill Graves (Landlord Services Manager)

46. APOLOGIES

Apologies were received from Councillors Gotch and Henwood.

The Panel also noted apologies from Suzanne Stocking, a member of the Tenant Scrutiny Panel.

47. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

None declared.

48. TENANT INVOLVEMENT

The Landlord Services Manager introduced the report. He said that the previous tenant scrutiny regime and structure had been discontinued in November 2012 but that the service had come a long way since then, engaging with the Involvement Strategy. The Council had recently become the third local authority to achieve a TPAS accreditation. The Tenant Scrutiny Panel was now much more positive and inclusive and there were plans to further improve and develop the Tenant Involvement service in the months ahead.

The Panel congratulated officers and tenants for turning the service around over recent years and achieving the TPAS accreditation. The Panel questioned how tenants were recruited and how the Tenant Scrutiny Panel operated before considering each of the tenant involvement activities in turn.

The Panel heard that tenants were recruited to tenant involvement in various ways and that on occasion, some Councillors had come forward with suggestions.

The Panel heard that the balance of the Tenant Scrutiny Panel membership was broadly proportionate to the total numbers of Council tenants and leaseholders. Tenants had asked for leaseholder involvement in the Tenants in Touch Editorial Panel and planned to include more content specifically aimed at leaseholders.

The Panel questioned the costs of producing Tenants in Touch and heard that it cost £3k produce approximately 8500 copies of each issue and post these to tenants and leaseholders. The newsletter was included with rents statements to save postage costs following a tenants' suggestion. Other suggestions from tenants included presentational changes and the inclusion of a crossword and a 'no trick or treat poster', which had been well received.

The Panel asked whether consideration had been given to including paid advertising in Tenants in Touch in order to cover some of the production costs. The Panel heard that this had not been considered but a tenant suggested that more could be done to promote local charities and support groups.

The Panel questioned how many people accessed Tenants in Touch online and suggested that it should be easy to access and read using the Council's mobile app.

A tenant involved in testing the online repairs portal advised that significant changes had been made in response to tenants' feedback. A further suggestion was that users should be able to easily report other things when accessing the portal, such as incidents of anti-social behaviour, but clarity was needed as to whether this suggestion was being taken forwards.

In response to a question about systems testing, the Panel heard that the Tenant Involvement Team link in with community-based IT training provision and publicising this training on the portal. The Panel supported these links, as well as continuing to involve tenants in trialling online services.

The Panel heard that tenant involvement in procurement had raised the bar and provided real empowerment. The furnished tenancy scheme had enabled tenants to make choices about their living environments. The same process was followed for the Tower Block Refurbishment Programme, where tenants were involved in choosing questions, interviewing and scoring contractors. It was suggested that tenants should be involved in the tendering process from the outset and that tenants could be encouraged to register their interest in getting involved in future procurement exercises.

The Panel heard that tenants on interview panels had provided invaluable insights and contributions to the recruitment process. Their views and scores had carried equal weight to those of officers on the interviews panels. The Council wanted to mainstream this work by involving stakeholders in recruitment to key housing posts as standard and the Panel fully supported this approach.

In response to a question about joint partnership working, the Panel heard that tenants had visited and were continuing to engage with tenants of Reading Borough Council, which was proving to be very useful. Tenants said that they wanted to continue to build links with other authorities and housing associations in different parts of the country.

The Panel heard that the annual Tenant and Leaseholder Conference would be taking place on Wednesday 13 April 2016. Elected members hadn't been specifically invited but would be welcome to attend and feedback would be gathered and circulated following the event.

Tenants commented that the equality and diversity training course provided by officers that Tenant Scrutiny Panel members were required to take had been excellent. Some tenants had also attended negotiation skills training. Tenants said that they were keen for training to continue and for the scope of the courses offered to be widened. It was suggested that courses would be useful on business acumen and understanding budgets, to help tenants to understand and scrutinise the new Housing Company, and on group dynamics and behaviours, to assist tenants in working together. It was suggested that the Tenant Involvement Team should use a matrix to keep track of which tenants had attending which training sessions.

The Panel heard that an awareness and training programme had been delivered to tenants of the Council's sheltered blocks and questioned whether activities in sheltered blocks could be 'opened up' to non-residents, including tenants who may be thinking of downsizing. The Panel heard that in some cases this could be possible but some blocks were stricter about letting visitors enter communal areas.

The Panel considered the Tenant Involvement Team's improvement focus for 2016-17, which included plans to develop 'virtual involvement', involving tenants in influencing new build developments and a Tenant Involvement Review Group to scrutinise the service. The Panel suggested that involving tenants in estate regeneration projects should also be a priority for the team.

The Panel noted that there are some 4,000 potential tenants currently on the waiting list for social housing and questioned whether there are plans to make use of their views and feedback. The Panel heard that while this was not a current customer group of the Tenant Involvement Team, there may be opportunities to involve them in future, for example in improving the customer experience of those on the Housing Register.

The Panel AGREED to request the following additional information:

- The numbers of hits on the Tenants in Touch webpages.
- Feedback from the Tenant and Leaseholder conference.
- Performance against measures and targets set by the Local Offer Working Group.

The Panel AGREED to make fourteen recommendations to the City Executive Board on 14 April 2016:

1. That elected members are asked to approach or suggest tenants who may wish to contribute to tenant involvement.
2. That the Tenants in Touch newsletter continues to include some content (e.g. one page) specifically aimed at leaseholders.
3. That consideration is given to exploring opportunities to offset some of the costs of producing Tenants in Touch through paid sponsorship or advertising, as well as promoting local charities and support groups.
4. That Tenants in Touch is fully accessible using the Council's mobile app.
5. That tenants using the repairs portal are signposted to reporting other things, such as incidents of anti-social behaviour.
6. That the Tenant Involvement Team continues to support and link with local IT training (such as the Blackbird Leys Information Technology Zone) and facilitate trials of new online services.

7. That tenants are involved in future procurement processes from the early stages through to selection, perhaps on a rotating basis from within a pool of tenants who have expressed an interest.
8. That tenant involvement in recruiting to housing posts is mainstreamed with involved tenants having a full and equal say in the process of recruitment.
9. That joint partnership working opportunities continue to be provided, enabling the sharing of best practice and ideas with other local authorities and housing associations.
10. That elected members are invited to the annual Tenant and Leaseholder Conference in future years.
11. That a training matrix is created to assist in keeping track of which tenants have attended the basic and more advanced training courses.
12. That consideration is given to inviting non-residents to organised activities within sheltered blocks, where it is appropriate and safe to do so.
13. That consideration is given to the involvement of tenants in regeneration projects at Blackbird Leys and Barton, possibly as part of the Tenant Involvement Team's improvement focus for 2016-17.
14. That consideration is given to opportunities to involve and seek the views of potential future tenants who are currently on the Housing Register.

49. HOUSING PANEL WORK PROGRAMME

The Panel noted the work plan and agreed that an item on the Council Tax Support scheme should be added to the long-list of topics for consideration in 2016/17.

The Panel said that it considered the following housing items on the long list to be of high priority:

- Empty Property Strategy
- Reducing under-occupation
- Great Estates

50. NOTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING

The Panel approved the notes of the meeting held on 9 March 2016.

51. DATE OF NEXT MEETING

The Panel noted that the Scrutiny Committee will agree its standing panels for the year ahead in June 2016 and that, if continued, the next Housing Panel meeting was provisionally scheduled for 7 July 2016.

The meeting started at 5.00 pm and ended at 7.05 pm