
Tenant Involvement and Empowerment: A Mini-Review

Report of the Housing and Homelessness Panel
Commissioned by Oxford City Council's Scrutiny Committee

March 2022

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Foreword by the Chair



Oxford City Council is deliberately unusual in that it has retained responsibility for its social housing stock rather than creating an arms-length housing association. It is responsible for 7,800 homes throughout the city. A key rationale for this decision is that retaining responsibility for these homes gives the Council control over how they are run, which gives the Council greater opportunity to ensure higher satisfaction and better outcomes for its tenants. It also provides the Council a challenge to realise that potential. On this, the Council has had reasonable success; in the recent tenant and leaseholder satisfaction survey 85% of respondees stated they were satisfied with the Council's customer service. However, this overall satisfaction masks a number of areas in which the feedback from tenants has been less positive.

The most concerning statistic is that 55% of tenants reported that their views are listened to and acted upon; almost half of all respondees fed back the view that the Council does not listen or act upon their views. For a Council which deliberately has retained control of its housing to deliver a better service to tenants, to ignore this would undermine its very rationale and prove right those who doubt that the Council listens to its tenants.

The Council's Housing function faces significant change: from government with the progress of the Social Housing white paper towards becoming law, and to its internal structure with the merging of the Housing and Communities directorates. In undertaking this review, I hope that Scrutiny can make meaningful suggestions as to how to involve and empower tenants more, and put at the centre of the structure which emerges after these changes the improved self-determination, greater dignity and higher satisfaction that true collaboration brings.

Councillor Linda Smith, Chair of the Housing and Homelessness Panel

Chapter 1: Introduction

1. Each year the Scrutiny Committee undertakes two Review Groups, one to scrutinise the proposed Budget, and the other on a topic of its choosing with a view to taking a closer look at a topic of particular interest. This report is classed as a 'mini-review' and is an innovation of the Chair of the Housing and Homelessness Panel, Councillor Linda Smith. Instead of holding a traditional Review Group - with a specific membership appointed, a wide number of external witnesses invited to contribute, and a series of dedicated meetings - this mini-review has been incorporated into the work plan of the Housing and Homelessness Panel. At each of its meetings over the past civic year the Housing and Homelessness Panel has had one or more reports and presentations on different aspects on the selected topic, with a composite report provided in response. Necessarily, therefore, it has been slimmed down relative to a full Review Group. However, it is hoped that by focusing its energy on one particular topic throughout the year Scrutiny has engaged in the area of its activity where it can add most value to the Council, deep dives into topics.
2. The topic chosen for this mini-review, tenant involvement and empowerment, is a timely one. As a social landlord, significant legislative changes are underway to recast the relationship between social landlords and their tenants, partially in light of the failings of the Grenfell tragedy. The various elements of the government's Social Housing White Paper are expected to be drafted into law through regulation and regulation over the next few years. Furthermore, the Council itself is undergoing significant organisational change, integrating the Housing and Communities directorates with a view to delivering a more joined-up service. Finally, in 2021 the Council undertook its first survey of tenant satisfaction since 2015, providing valuable feedback on the views of tenants. A key theme which unites all these changes is a concern to improve the welfare of Council tenants, which is welcome. However, the Panel's focus has been to use these changes as a vehicle to explore a more fundamental question, how can tenants become more empowered and engaged amidst these changes? After all, who is best placed to make decisions in the best interests of tenants, but tenants themselves?
3. As referenced above, this report is based on a slimmed down review process, meaning a smaller number of individuals have been involved. The Housing and Homeless Panel is comprised of:
 - Councillor Linda Smith (Chair)
 - Councillor Nadine Bely-Summers
 - Councillor Lizzy Diggins
 - Councillor Laurence Fouweather
 - Councillor Chris Jarvis
 - Councillor Liz Wade
4. The Panel heard four reports over the course of the year: one to introduce the Council's current tenant involvement work, a second to outline the main changes proposed by the Social Housing White Paper, a third to review the results of the STAR tenant satisfaction survey, and the last to review the activity of the Council in responding to both the White Paper and the tenant satisfaction survey. This report therefore welcomed the knowledge and input of the following officers:

- Stephen Gabriel, Executive Director of Communities and People
 - Stephen Clarke, Head of Housing
 - Bill Graves, Landlord Services Manager
 - Simon Warde, Tenant Involvement Team Manager
 - Wendy Hind, Tenant Involvement Team Officer
5. To ensure tenant's voices were heard and included, six tenant ambassadors from different elements of the Council's tenant involvement functions were invited to attend and participate in discussion.
- Tony Buchanan (Housing Ombudsman Residents' Panel)
 - Susan Carson (IDA-ASB Group)
 - Anthony Church (Stakeholder Interviews)
 - Geno Humphrey (Tender Evaluation)
 - Brenda Walton (Tender Evaluation)
 - Olga Siddons (Environmental Improvement)
 - Dave Simons (Great Estates)
6. The Panel would like to place on record its thanks to all of the people who contributed to the review, which has enabled the recommendations in the report to be made.
7. This report will be presented to the Council's Scrutiny Committee for endorsement on 05 April 2022, and subsequently to the Cabinet on 13 April. On the grounds that even a mini-review generates a significant number of recommendations, responses to these recommendations are not requested until the 15 June Cabinet meeting.

Chapter 2: Findings and Recommendations

The Current Work of the Tenant Involvement Team

8. The Tenant Involvement Team is comprised of four permanent staff, and an apprentice. It exists to ensure compliance with the Regulator's 'Tenant Involvement and Empowerment Standard' through tenant involvement in the development, monitoring and scrutiny of Council tenant and leaseholder services. It is important to note from the outset that it is a historically successful team, holding Tenant Participation Advisory Service accreditation since 2016, being awarded Team of the Year that same year, and presenting at national conferences. Further, it is extremely apparent that all the tenant ambassadors, those tenants who take on a representative role, really value the support and enablement provided through the work of this team. It is important to recognise, however, that the Tenant Involvement Team is not the sole locus of tenant involvement, with the Consultation, Tenancy Management and Communities teams all regularly engaging tenants on different issues.
9. The work of the team is broadly split over three areas. The first is the groundwork for meaningful engagement, which is communication and relationship development. The team runs multiple communications channels, such as the (well-regarded) Tenants In Touch magazine, Facebook and tenant involvement web pages. In addition to this, the team also runs skills sessions for tenants, such as crafts, cookery and first aid. In addition to the skills developed, this provides a forum to nurture relationships with tenants, understand their concerns, and potentially identify those who want to become involved in shaping the Housing service in a more formalised way.
10. The second major area is to enable successful involvement of those who want to become more formally involved, the tenant ambassadors. Tenant ambassadors are involved a wide variety of fora:
 - *Stakeholder interviews.* Tenant ambassadors are involved in the stakeholder interviews of job candidates within the Housing directorate. To prepare them, Ambassadors are briefed beforehand - where the advert, job description and person specification are talked through – and given the opportunity for clarification. Model answers to questions are provided. During the interviews themselves, ambassadors are asked to score responses to the questions. These scores are fed back as part of the wider interview process. Ambassador involvement does not stop there, however, as chats with ambassadors also forms part of the induction process for suitable candidates.
 - *Tender evaluations.* A number of ambassadors have been trained by the Council to look at new contracts, as well as renewal tenders. When tender documentation is received by the Council it is passed on to participating tenant ambassadors, who score each one against the same matrix as Council officers. The only difference is that – at the request of the tenant ambassadors – the price is not included. Ambassadors are supported by council officers if they need help with clarification of technical issues. Having scored each tender individually, a joint meeting between ambassadors and council officers is held, where a consensus

score is reached. The procurement team subsequently add in the effect of the different prices offered to determine the favoured contractor.

- *Housing Ombudsman Residents' Panel*. This involves national level work, but also working with the Council to establish and maintain a complaints procedure in accordance with good practice recommended by the Housing Ombudsman. It also seeks to ensure that tenants are satisfied that it follows the new regulatory requirements as set out in the new Complaints Handling Code.
- *Great Estates*. Great Estates is the Council's programme to identify improvements to locality areas in need of upgrades and improvement. The level of involvement requires between two to four meetings per month with stakeholders of the Great Estates programme. The role of the ambassador is to identify areas suitable for makeovers, collecting resident views and ideas and ensuring they are put forward, and scoping proposals for upgrades. Stakeholder meetings, including ambassadors, are then held to agree priorities between different proposals.

11. The final area of focus is on service development and change. The Social Housing white paper requires much input from the Tenant Involvement team, but there are related areas of work from the Building Safety Bill and the Fire Safety Bill also. The team's major area of focus, however, is on establishing a Housing Development Working Group to involve tenants in the pre-planning stages of development sites and post-completion inspections to ensure they are of satisfactory standard, particularly in light of the acceleration of house building the Council plans to engage in over the coming decade.

Observations and Recommendations

12. The first observation made by the Panel is that although there is much good work being done, it is ad hoc. Tenant involvement is not built into the processes of the Council but an extra which is included. Thus, for example, there are no guidelines as to when tenants should be consulted in relation to procurement. At the moment this consultation relies on the commitment to good practice of officers, and could easily become marginalised if capacity were to be squeezed. The ease with which tenants can be overlooked is perhaps better illustrated by the fact that neither the appointment of the Executive Director of Communities and People or the Head of Housing Services had any input from tenants. These are two missed opportunities, and show why building tenant involvement into the Council's processes is vital for it to endure. The Panel would wish to see that the Council draws up guidelines of values above which procurement ambassadors will be offered the opportunity to become involved, or job gradings within Housing Services above which they will be invited be part of the interview process.

Recommendation 1: That the Council identifies appropriate thresholds above which procurement or interview-focused ambassadors will be invited to be involved in the respective process.

13. A key element in establishing any cultural change in an organisation is not just the processes, but the ownership and drive to realise that change by senior individuals. At present, this appears to be lacking. Both tenant ambassadors and the Tenant Involvement team highlighted their wish to see a regular forum established with relevant Cabinet members, senior officers and tenant and leaseholder representatives to bring up issues, but also to report on progress of issues. As referenced in the Chair's foreword, if only 55% of respondees to the tenant satisfaction survey feel that their views are heard

and acted upon then there is a disconnect which requires urgent remedy. Simply putting tenant representatives and senior individuals from the Council in the same room is a good start to addressing this, and the Panel would like to see this done as a matter of priority.

Recommendation 2: That the Council establishes a board with Cabinet member, senior officers and tenant and leaseholder representatives to meet on a regular basis to discuss tenant and leaseholder issues, and to report on progress and performance.

14. In addition to the creation of the board, the Panel also has suggestions to make as to its composition. It is accepted that there must be a degree of pragmatism as to who is best placed to act as a tenant representative. However, the Panel does urge the Council to make strong efforts to ensure that, so far as possible, tenant representatives reflect the demographic and geographical diversity of the Council's tenants. Doing so will ensure that specific groups within the body of tenants who might face particular issues are provided the opportunity to make their voices heard.

Recommendation 3: That the Council makes the greatest effort to ensure that tenant representatives on the board reflect the geographic and demographic diversity of the Council's tenants.

15. As a slight aside, to the above, the Panel is keen to stress that the board should operate in addition to and above the Council's existing tenant involvement activities and should in no way be a replacement for them. This is particularly important because there are tenants who are involved with the Council and making very valuable contributions, for whom a board would not be a forum in which they would feel comfortable.

16. A further point to make is that the Panel was particularly keen in discussion about the prospects of establishing a Housing Development Working Group. In a situation where a significant minority of tenants do not feel satisfied with the quality of their own home¹, giving existing tenants the power to shape council homes and check the suitability of homes for let is eminently sensible. In discussion, it was established that plans had not been to give tenants a say on internal design issues, more the big picture topics. However, in many ways, the nuts and bolts of creating a nice home are largely the issues that people care about because they can relate it to their own home. The Panel feels it is important, therefore, that interior design ideas are included within the Housing Development Working Group's scope. With this change of focus, however, the Panel does suggest a name change would be in order to more closely reflect its purpose.

Recommendation 4: That the Council establishes the planned Housing Development Working Group as a matter of priority, that it includes within its scope issues relating to interior design of the homes built, and that a more precise name is agreed.

17. Finally, the Panel discussed in depth the fact that all tenant ambassadors do so in a voluntary capacity. They are not paid for the time they spend as ambassadors. Whilst the Panel supports this view, it does also recognise that the effort and dedication they exhibit should be recognised if not remunerated. This wish, however, comes up against a

¹ See the following section on the Tenant Satisfaction Survey for more details.

practical problem: if done incorrectly, the way that an ambassador is recognised may be considered a payment in kind, and trigger a claw back of benefits. Clearly, the Council must ensure that in trying to recognise the contribution of ambassadors it does not inadvertently cause them to be penalised. This does not mean, however, that the idea should be given up as being too difficult. The Panel considers this to be an important principle, and would like to see it implemented. The following ideas have not been tested, but arose from the Panel's discussions and are included for follow-up. They are: invitations of tenant ambassadors to civic functions such as the Lord Mayor's Ball, holding a specific thank you 'bash' for all ambassadors, long-service recognition, and free leisure centre access. It is accepted that they may not be suitable for all ambassadors, but the Panel would prefer to see some efforts made towards recognition, even if they are not universally accessible.

Recommendation 5: That the Council implements ways to recognise the contributions of tenant ambassadors which do not incur universal credit clawback or other benefit issues.

Findings of the STAR Tenant Satisfaction Survey

18. From May to July 2021 the Council undertook its tenant and leaseholder satisfaction survey, the first since 2015. Given the period since the previous survey and the low response-rate previously, the Council did not consult with just a sample of tenants but made significant efforts by mail, phone, telephone and personal visits to hear from all its tenants and leaseholders. In total, 1579 tenants (23%) and 84 leaseholders (12%) responded. Though not exhaustive, this level of feedback provides reliable data on the trends found amongst the Council's tenants and, to a lesser degree, its leaseholders.
19. The responses show some clear areas of strength:
- 85% are satisfied with our customer service
 - 81% believe their rent is value for money
 - 80% feel safe and secure in their home
20. In terms of value for money, Oxford's result compares with a national figure of 43%. The Council also outperforms national average on how the Council runs things, being kept well informed, trust and acting on concerns. However, the reason the Council runs its own housing service is to outperform, and whilst the comparisons with elsewhere may be favourable, there are also areas of underperformance when the bald figures are presented. In particular:
- 76% are satisfied with the Council as a landlord
 - 67% are satisfied with the quality of the home
 - 55% believe tenants' views are listened to and acted upon
 - 49% are satisfied with the outcome of an antisocial behaviour (ASB) complaint
21. To put this another way, one in four tenants are dissatisfied with the Council as a landlord, approximately 2,000. One in three are not satisfied with the quality of their own home, 2,600. And only just over one in two believe tenants views are listened to and acted upon. It is important that some context be provided regarding the figures generally, and the lower two in particular. In surveying tenants in 2021 the Council did so at a point

where much of the population was fed up, having experienced lengthy lockdowns, including the cancellation of Christmas. These lockdowns also reduced the capability of the Council to get into tenants' homes to undertake repairs, meaning a less responsive service. Given that the single most important driver of both satisfaction and dissatisfaction is the repairs service, inevitably these factors will have hit figures. Likewise, the latter two are likely linked; the Council has a policy position over anti-social behaviour, which was endorsed by Scrutiny - that the Council's ASB approach should be about protecting victims rather than punishing perpetrators. It is clear that many of those who suffer ASB do not share the Council's views. On the face of it, this may prove problematic to the Panel's wish to see greater empowerment of tenants. However, it should be remembered that perpetrators are likely to be tenants also, who have their own vulnerabilities and who need support to change more than punishment.

22. Notwithstanding the caveats above, that barely one in two tenants believe their views are listened to and acted upon by the Council is telling. It is the view of the Panel that this statistic may flow into other areas of underperformance, such as satisfaction with the Council as a landlord, and satisfaction with the quality of the home.
23. The Council does already have an action plan to address the issues arising from the tenant satisfaction survey, as well preparing for the requirements of the Social Housing white paper. Many of the proposed changes will enable greater tenant involvement and empowerment. For example, improvements to the tracking of repairs will enable tenants to hold the Council accountable. Technological solutions to allow tenants to give feedback on key aspects of the work received will drive up standards, as will a policy to contact anybody rating the service below seven out of ten for a follow-up call. Some, such as more effective inventory management will drive up standards but without involving or empowering tenants. The Panel has reviewed this plan in detail and is supportive of its proposals, but makes the following recommendations.²

Observations and Recommendations

24. An interesting sub-current to the overall figures are the level of satisfaction by age, which show a clear correlation between age and satisfaction or, to put it another way, that the younger people are, the less satisfied they are with key aspects of the Council's service. The data are as follows:

	Under 25	25 – 59	60+
Overall satisfaction	58%	70%	85%
Quality of the home	42%	57%	81%
Repairs and Maintenance	63%	71%	84%

25. Demographically, the Council's tenants skew heavily towards older people, meaning that there are many fewer younger tenants than older ones. As such, the dissatisfaction of this cohort is drowned out in the overall figures, but the difference is significant, with levels of satisfaction falling by a range of 21-39% between the youngest and oldest age

² For completeness, the results of the tenant satisfaction survey and the progress against the action plan are included as Appendix 1 and Appendix 2 to this report respectively.

groups. This is stark, and an issue of concern that a significant majority of younger tenants are dissatisfied with the quality of the home provided by the Council.

26. The Panel raised this issue with officers, and it is something they were aware of. However, no precise reason could be given. Those younger respondees who assented to be contacted for follow-ups from the survey are being contacted, to learn what the reasons are. The Panel certainly welcomes this. However, finding out something is wrong and then finding out how to fix it is a reactive solution, and a sub-optimal one. The Panel ventures to suggest that greater representation of younger tenants amongst the tenant ambassadors might be more effective in preventing issues from arising in the first place.

Recommendation 6: That the Council recruits more tenant ambassadors from younger age groups, particularly to participate in the Housing Development Working Group and Great Estates

27. On almost the exact flipside to the above, the Panel also identified that there is a need for help for older people. Over 3000 of the Council's properties include a tenant over 65. Although tenant services and management formed a small number of the overall comments on how the Council could improve, at just 3%, within that help for older residents and those with health issues emerged as the key concern, receiving more than twice as many comments as the next nearest. This suggests that there is an issue, and given the size of this cohort it needs to be addressed. It is important to recognise, however, that the Council does not receive funding for activities beyond issues relating to broader topics beyond the home itself. Nevertheless, it appears there is sufficient demand to require one and the Panel recommends, therefore, that a specific tenant ambassador should be recruited to represent the views and needs of older people, particularly those who are frail or in need of medical assistance.

Recommendation 7: That the Council recruits a tenant ambassador to represent the views of older, frailer residents.

28. The issue regarding young tenants illustrates how genuine needs amongst a minority can be crowded out when included in large populations. In Oxford, it is the case for young people. However, the Panel is concerned that it can also be the case for groups bound together by geography. The Council has the capacity to analyse responses to the survey by ward, but not more granular than that. This is still a significant improvement on a city-wide level of reporting. This is important, because the Council has Communities budgets which, to date, have been administered separately to Housing budgets. Part of the justification for joining them is to provide a more unified service; the Panel's view is that the survey is a very useful source of information on the issues experienced by individuals in a locality and would guide and enrich Communities budgets.
29. Though perhaps not strictly a tenant involvement or engagement issue, Panel members voiced the view that it was likely all members would want to know the results for their wards, but that a fuller and more complete picture would emerge if that data were to be considered alongside new census results and the views of locality workers it could provide a strong basis for understanding and planning locality-based work.

Recommendation 8: That the Council interrogates the data at ward-level from the census (when available), and the tenant satisfaction survey, alongside the knowledge of locality workers to develop a profile of the specific needs of each ward, and that this is shared with members and used to identify priorities for work planning at community level.

30. The following recommendation is fairly high-level, seeking to address the fact that only 55% of tenants believe the Council listens to and acts upon their comments. Council tenants have a particular relationship with the Council, which brings a lot of extra rights, obligations and expectations. At present, this special identity is not well reflected in the Council's structures. Tenants have a relationship with the Council generally, and with ODS, the Council's contractor. It is the view of the Panel that there is little for tenants to engage with when they want to engage with the Council specifically in its role as landlord. If tenants are to feel as though they are being listened to and their concerns acted upon, it is important that they know how to engage with the Council at the right level. To enable this, the Panel feels that a clearer Housing identity is developed, distinct from both the Council generally and ODS, so that tenants are clear where to make their comments to ensure they will be listened to and acted upon.

Recommendation 9: That the Council works to develop a distinct Housing identity

31. Concurrent to this report is a report from the Housing and Homelessness Panel on a motion relating to DSS discrimination. One of the outcomes from the motion was the establishment of a forum for private sector and Council tenants to air issues. However, as the other report suggests, it questions whether the needs of Council and private tenants are sufficiently aligned to complement each other and has recommended that the forum should be given the option to split. The Housing and Homelessness Panel is keen that should such a split occur, that given the relative numbers of private rented sector tenants and the acuteness of abuses that the needs of Council tenants are not overlooked. Notwithstanding the fact that the problems for Council tenants are less numerous or acute than those in the private rented sector, the Panel believes that an open forum, where Council tenants can raise particular issues without a long-term commitment, is a useful facility in addressing the fact only 55% of tenants believe their comments are listened to and acted upon.

Recommendation 10: That in the event that the Tenants Forum established by the DSS discrimination motion does decide not to pursue a joint Council and private rented sector structure, that the Council ensures that a Council Tenants Forum continues to be provided.

The Social Housing White Paper

32. The tragedy at Grenfell, albeit belatedly, exposed serious deficiencies in the regulation and operation of social housing providers in relation to tenant safety. To that end, central government has put forward a white paper outlining a transformational change in the relationship between social landlords and their tenants. Whilst safety is the overriding theme, empowering tenants is a key enabler towards this end and was therefore considered by the Panel.
33. As in the preceding section, the Panel considered the impacts and readiness of the Council to implement the white paper *in total*, including those elements less directly

linked to tenant engagement and empowerment. This report, however, does not intend to provide a comprehensive introduction to the white paper and instead focuses on those relevant elements. Again, for completeness, the presentation made to the Panel is attached to this report as Appendix 3, which provides a more complete introduction to the full breadth of the changes and implications of this legislation.

34. Briefly, the white paper is a tenants' charter, outlining seven fundamental rights of a social tenant:

- *To be safe in your home.* More stringent safety requirements will be enacted, but also greater individualisation of those requirements. For example, having up to date personal emergency evacuation plans (PEEPs) based on individuals' own situations. Ascertaining this degree of individualisation will require much more contact with tenants, and significant resource has been added to the Council's budget to enable this.
- *To know how your landlord is performing.* The Council would be required to inform every tenant, at least once a year, on its performance. Proscribed information focuses on compliance with multiple safety measures, the Decent Homes Standard, success in resolving complaints promptly and fairly, management and handling of anti-social behaviour and levels of tenant satisfaction over a number of key areas such as engagement, health and safety, overall condition, repairs handling, management of communal spaces, and the wider neighbourhood. Also included within performance reporting all social landlords are required to make available information on spending, and be subject to challenge by residents if spending was thought not to be in the right place.
- *To have complaints dealt with promptly and fairly.* The biggest change, a move from a three stage to a two stage complaints procedure has already been implemented by the Council.
- *To be treated with respect.* A key foundation of the approach is that providers co-regulate with their tenants, which stresses the ongoing importance of the Tenant Ambassadors programme and the extensions identified to it in the recommendations above.
- *To have your voice heard by your landlord.* Under the proposals, social landlords would need to actively seek out best practice, including through training of staff and empowerment of tenants, of ways to improve engagement by tenants with their landlords. Practically, this will mean mandatory visits by the Council, instead of the present situation when if residents are living happily in their homes with no major life events or issues there is nothing to prompt a visit. These tenant meetings will seek to: find out what matters to each tenant; check on the general condition of the home (unreported repairs/damp); gather information on protected characteristics, contact preferences, reasonable adjustments needed and contacts; promote tenant portal to aid channel shift and effective reporting of repairs.
- *To have a good quality home and neighbourhood to live in.* A lot of work is being implemented to raise home standards, but this is an extension of an existing duty. The more novel duty is the provider's responsibility towards improving the

neighbourhood, via physical infrastructure, the tackling of antisocial behaviour and health and wellbeing initiatives. The prioritisation of this work, particularly in light of the feedback from tenants regarding antisocial behaviour, will require strong tenant involvement.

- *To be supported to take your first steps to ownership.* With Oxford's high house prices, even at a reduced rate this is a minor issue.

Observations and Recommendations

35. It is perhaps useful to clarify terms at this point. There is a difference meant between tenant engagement and tenant involvement. Both are important steps towards empowering tenants and the delineation between them is not absolute, but generally speaking the focus on tenant engagement is about landlords having contact with their tenants, knowing their needs and wants. Tenant involvement focuses more on the tenant, and is about giving tenants greater say in decisions over their homes and neighbourhoods. The Social Housing white paper is heavier on tenant engagement than tenant involvement. This is welcomed by the Panel as important, but it also means there are fewer relevant issues for recommendations than might be imagined for legislation which seeks to recast the relationship between tenants and social housing providers back in favour of tenants.
36. The first set of recommendations recognises that good quality tenant involvement has as a prerequisite tenants who are informed. The Social Housing white paper outlines much more extensive reporting duties than beforehand. The Panel supports this principle, but actually feels that the Council could, and should, go further and faster than the requirements. Discussions with officers suggest that through being linked in with the QL system, live reporting is available instead of just providing the mandatory annual report. The Panel feels it is important that this should be implemented, and also that regular publicising of the Council's performance should occur, for example regularly including performance as part of the Tenants in Touch newsletter. The Panel also suggests that to provide a fuller and more balanced context to results presented, the Council should not just publish its results on their own, but should provide the data of relevant comparator social housing providers also when doing so. And finally, because this accountability and sharing of information with tenants is so important, the Panel would wish to see this implemented as soon as possible. The Housing and Homelessness Panel expects to be requesting this information to be submitted as a regular dashboard as part of its performance scrutiny of housing in the forthcoming civic year.

Recommendation 11: That the Council prioritises the collection of the KPIs required for distribution by the Social Housing white paper.

Recommendation 12: That the Council publishes, in addition to the annual report required by the Social Housing white paper, live performance data on its website, and distributes performance details to tenants in each Tenants in Touch magazine.

Recommendation 13: That in its reporting against Social Housing white paper KPIs the Council benchmarks against relevant comparators

37. As part of its annual report on performance, the Council must publish details of its spending, proposals which are subject to challenge by residents if they are not found to be in the right place. This is all well, but for it to be more than just a theoretical right a formal structure must be in place to enable it, and residents must know how to make use of it. Currently, tenants are provided with details of the Council's HRA spending proposals via a special edition of Tenants in Touch as part of the budget and invited to make comments. The Panel queries whether this is satisfactory. Tenants may approve of, for example, budget provision to improve energy efficiency, but may be implacably opposed to particular items of spend within that, heat pumps for example. An annual consultation on a highly complex, high level document appears to fall short. To be meaningful, communication work must be undertaken with those who want to be involved in discussions to explain the complexities of the budget, the ability to challenge spending at a level more granular than the Budget must be enabled, and the ability to raise challenge in a timely fashion.
38. As an aside, the value of communication and involvement can be seen by previous efforts made by Housing to involve interested tenants. At a time when the Council was wishing to use money within the HRA to build more social houses, tenants were supportive of the policy when the issues were presented to them. This was despite the fact it would mean both rental increases for themselves, and less spare money to invest in their homes and neighbourhoods. This is a good example of the way tenant involvement can help all parties move together to develop policy and financial priorities which have the support of all those concerned.

Recommendation 14: That the Council reviews whether the structures to enable tenants to challenge areas of spend under the Social Housing white paper are sufficient to give tenants meaningful challenge to Council spending

39. With the responsibility on the Council as a landlord to improve not only homes but neighbourhoods under the white paper, the £1.1m per year Great Estates programme is expected to become increasingly important. However, it was the view of members that although significant sums were involved, even experienced members did not understand the process for identifying and influencing priorities. It was surmised that if the process to influence Great Estates project priorities was opaque to council members, it would also likewise prove difficult to influence for tenants. The Panel wishes to draw attention to this issue, and ask that clarification for members and tenants on how they can be involved in the process is provided.

Recommendation 15: That the Council implements and promotes a clearer process for councillors and tenants to influence the spending of the Great Estates programme.

40. A lot of the changes in the Social Housing white paper are regulatory and beyond the purview of this report. However, amidst the tightening of external regulation there is also a reminder of the responsibilities of those in charge to ensure safe homes are provided. "It is the responsibility of the boards of housing associations and other private providers of social housing, or of Councillors in local authority landlords, to be assured that they comply with the outcome focused standards set by the regulator." Unfortunately, there are times when tenants are legitimately dissatisfied with the quality of their home, or the

work that has been done to it, and they are struggling to get this addressed. One important avenue to seek help is their local ward member. Panel members, however, have stated that they, unlike councillors in other authorities, do not have access to a casework management system to check on progress of activity. When this was discussed with officers it was suggested that the QL system could provide this service, the biggest difficulty to be addressed being GDPR issues. Whilst a challenge, it does not appear to be insurmountable, and the value to tenants of having a councillor know in real time the progress of an intractable issue is significant. The Panel recommends that the Council sets up such a system within the next 12 months.

Recommendation 16: That the Council implements a councillor casework system for housing issues within QL within 12 months

41. The tenant satisfaction survey indicated that anti-social behaviour (ASB) is a clear area of dissatisfaction amongst tenants, with only 49% satisfied with the outcome of an ASB complaint. On its own, this is a strong reason for the Panel to investigate. However, as mentioned above, under the duty in the Social Housing white paper to provide good quality neighbourhoods, the tackling of ASB is a key focus, which provides further reason to do so.
42. Reductions to police resources over the past decade have reduced the scope of police forces, including Thames Valley Police, to devote energy to non-core work. Community policing has been especially hard hit in this regard. Previously, Neighbourhood Action Groups allowed the police, council staff and members of local communities to convene to discuss issues of concern and coordinate responses.³ This model was valuable. Discussions from Panel members suggests that some additional money may have recently been made available to the Police for community policing. The Panel encourages the Council to investigate the details of this further. If this is confirmed, it would wish the Council to have discussions over whether Neighbourhood Action Groups could be reinstated in priority areas.

Recommendation 17: That the Council holds discussions with Thames Valley Police to determine whether additional resources for community policing have become available, and to propose reinstating Neighbourhood Action Groups or similar ward-based stakeholder meetings in priority areas if so.

43. A further issue explored by the Panel was that of links between the Police and the new locality-based way of working by the Council. Feedback provided was that the Police were happy to engage with the Council on joint-working, but would be coming on board in the second stage, once the Council had established its locality-based working more fully. When this is up and running, the Panel sees strong opportunity for tenants to be able to raise ASB-related concerns at this locality level, and encourages the Council to do as much preparatory work as possible to allow this to be established at the earliest opportunity.

³ The relevant discussion was held with the sergeant in charge of the PCSOs covering the northern half of the city.

Recommendation 18: That the Council undertakes preparatory work with the Police to enable joint-working at a locality level to be established as quickly as possible.

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Chapter 3: Conclusion

44. A key ongoing theme throughout this mini-review has been the importance staff place upon and commitment to achieving strong levels of tenant involvement, and the appreciation of tenant ambassadors of the efforts made by the Council to empower them. There is clear goodwill by staff and tenants to work together to improve the Council's service to tenants. It should not be forgotten that the Council is an award-winning Council in this regard. On the other hand, true joint working must involve honest listening and the results of the STAR tenant satisfaction survey were clear in that there are certain elements of the Council's offer, and certain groups of tenants, for whom levels of satisfaction are not as high as either party would wish. Key issues highlighted to the Council include the satisfaction with homes amongst younger tenants, concerns that the Council does not listen and act upon what is heard, and dissatisfaction with how ASB issues are resolved.
45. As the Council emerges from Covid, its direction of travel is not simply a return to the *status quo ante*. The success of locality based working during the pandemic has been a driver for internal restructuring, whilst from outside the Council central government's Social Housing white paper has put a large number of new responsibilities on all providers of social housing, including many steps which empower tenants. Consequently, the Housing function faces very significant change. The Panel has considered the Council's plans overall, but also specifically through the lens of tenant involvement and empowerment. Largely, the Panel finds that the Council's proposals are to be commended, with the Panel's recommendations largely seeking that existing plans are brought forward or that clarification is given of how existing work is undertaken. Only in one instance, the right of tenants to challenge spend, has a genuine mismatch between the Council's proposals and the Panel's interpretation of the Council's duties been identified. This reflects the Panel's view that overall, the Council is pushing off from a solid foundation.
46. A final word from the Panel is this. With a report such as this it is easy to focus on the recommendations made, putting them into practice and ticking them off as 'done'. Whilst the Panel stands by all the recommendations it has made, it wishes to stress the point made at the very beginning of this report – that the very purpose of the Council retaining its social housing is to have the ability to outperform other providers. Our tenants have told us that one of the deficiencies in our service relates to how much the Council listens to and acts on concerns. The Panel's recommendations largely are ways to address this issue. However, they are only suggested responses and are not the only template to do so. More than the individual recommendations themselves, the Panel wishes to commend to the Council the need to continue building on steps it has taken to date to involve and empower tenants. If the Council can really embed an approach where tenant involvement and empowerment is a lodestar, a question which is asked at every level and with every decision, the Council's ambition to provide better housing to its tenants than alternative providers will be realised.