

The East Riding of Yorkshire Council Tenant Scrutiny Panel

Communication Under Scrutiny



FORWORD

Taken from the recent report commissioned by the Local Government Association and developed in partnership with TPAS (Tenants Participation Advisory Service) entitled " Engaging and empowering tenants in council owned housing estates:

Quote; "A lack of response or change as a result of tenants engaging with landlords is a key factor reported to TPAS that impacts on tenants' willingness to engage further and taking up other avenues to give feedback." (ref sec 3 p9)

The Tenant Scrutiny Panel (Panel) hopes that the findings of its investigation are considered and aid the East Riding of Yorkshire Council (Council) to bring about increased levels of satisfaction amongst its tenants in the way it communicates with them.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

To act upon the results of the 2018 Satisfaction Survey is important and will affect the relationship between the Council and its tenants. Also, the outcome of the Social Housing Green Paper consultation and the consultation into regulatory standards will determine how housing services are provided. With these in mind the Panel decided to examine the communication methods used by the Council as at some future stage it is likely to be called upon to demonstrate their effectiveness.

The following principles in effective communication were applied:

- a. Capturing evidence and publicising the impact of involvement;
- b. Recognising that every point of contact is an opportunity for information to be transferred and for the harvesting of feedback;
- c. Changes to demographics requires a move away from the traditional methods of communication to much more engaging and appreciated methods; and
- d. Knowing the target audience and their characteristics is essential to success.

TENANT SCRUTINY PANEL

Report to: East Riding of Yorkshire Council

Report title: Communication

Date: May 2019

1 Purpose of the Report

To give the findings of an examination into the forms of communication used by the Tenant Participation Team (TP Team) to further improve resident/tenant involvement.

2 Background

The 2018 Tenant Satisfaction Survey – Final Report showed the weakest areas of satisfaction to be around three questions, namely

“How satisfied or dissatisfied are you with the opportunity to influence the way we deliver our housing services?” (69%)

“How satisfied or dissatisfied are you that the Council’s housing services listen to your views and acts upon them?” (62%)

“How do you access information about the Council’s housing?” (42% said Your East Riding and 19% said Homing In publications)

Even though the results were slightly higher than the 2016 satisfaction levels, the Panel decided that communication with residents/tenants should be examined to see if improvements could be made.

The investigation involved:

- 2.1 Interviewing and shadowing TP Team staff;
- 2.2 Analysing the Tenant Partnership Agreement and associated documents;
- 2.3 Investigating the methods used by the TP Team;
- 2.4 Comparing methods used against Homes and Community regulatory standards;
- 2.5 An examination of the Tenant Participation budget (2018/19);
- 2.6 Seeking the views of a Focus Group;

2.7 Exploring other organisations' methods of communication; and

2.8 Looking at non-housing engagement.

3 Equality Implications

Whilst these are implicit in this report, the actual equality implications must be fully evaluated when formulating the outcome of any of the report recommendations.

4 Current Situation

The Council's foundation for engaging with residents/tenants is set out in the Tenant Partnership Agreement supported by the Strategy and Action Plan. These statements were agreed in 2000 and last revised in November 2018.

The current methods of communication as set out in the Action Plan are:

4.1 articles in tenant newsletters;

4.2 flyers to specific estates and by 'word of mouth';

4.3 tenant contact surveys;

4.4 public meetings;

4.5 new tenancy visits;

4.6 information on the Council's website;

4.7 e-mail address file of tenants;

4.8 attending sports, play and development sessions;

4.9 encouraging the development of local agreements;

4.10 local standard surveys;

4.11 tenant satisfaction surveys;

4.12 contact surveys; and

4.13 attending meetings.

NB The Estate "walk-about" has been discontinued. The Issuing of the Tenants Handbook to new tenants has stopped. The authority to hold e-mail addresses for general purposes remains unsure and there is one only local agreement currently in place.

5 Investigation

5.1 In comparison to some other councils, for instance West Sussex, Hampshire and West Riding of Yorkshire, the Council's website is not considered user friendly for the first-time user or the less experienced user. It lacks the flair of, for example, Lincoln City Council's and Hull City Councils websites which have graphics

designed to make them more appealing and encourage their use. On the other hand, users of the Council's website often have to know the correct terminology in order to search for correct information.

- 5.2 An area of concern was the strategy of access via automated information and the possibility that this may exclude a high proportion of disadvantaged residents/tenants with no easy access to the internet.
- 5.3 Interviews and shadowing TP Team staff highlighted the difficulties of effectively engaging with residents/tenants due to apathy, lack of awareness or appreciation of the opportunities for involvement. A contributing factor may be that the lifestyle of many residents/tenants do not necessarily fit in well with the TP Team's timetable. It was felt that tenants were often having to comply with the Council's arrangements rather than the reverse. Successful responses were more likely to come about by accident rather than design. Also, there are examples of the TP Team not being made aware of other Council departments projects in an area thus leading to duplication of contact. As a consequence, opportunities to promote awareness and involvement are being missed.
- 5.4 Ten other Local Authorities were contacted about their methods of communication. These were selected from the list of authorities in the Council's bench marking group. The comparison revealed the methods used were much the same as those deployed by East Riding Council. An exact comparison was not possible because each have their own format and structure for engagement. In some cases, residents/tenants have direct access to their TP Team but in other areas it is via contact centres, like the Council. What became apparent was the inconsistency of knowledge of staff in some local authorities about the activities and responsibilities of their Tenant Participation Officers. This has been found to be the case by some residents/tenants of the Council.
- 5.5 The Housing Quality Network, The Chartered Institute of Housing, The Joseph Rowntree Foundation, TPAS, Association of Retained Council Housing (ARCH) and the National Federation of Housing were approached about published guidance on the most effective means of communication. This revealed that whilst no detailed study has been undertaken, qualitative rather than quantitative advice has been the subject of several reports, the most relevant being:
 - 5.5.1 Future of Engagement E – book TPAS 2018 which explores the latest trends in engaging with tenants, including gamification, behavioural change and pop up engagement.
 - 5.5.2 Tenants Leading Change issued by the Department for Communities and Local Government which outlines the business benefits of tenant involvement.
 - 5.5.3 The Local Government Association in collaboration with TPAS report "Engaging and empowering tenants in council owned housing". Essential reference. C.I.H. Rethinking Social Housing Final Report. Government's Green Paper – A New Deal for Social Housing.
- 5.6 Of these, Engaging and Empowering Tenants in Council Owned Housing is considered to be the most comprehensive and of most use. Many of the findings of the Panel's examination are given credibility by similar findings in the report.

6 Tenant Participation Budget

- 6.1 A detailed analysis of the budget has not been carried out at this stage as the financial effect of implementing any of the Panel's recommendations would be best assessed by Review Groups set up for specific purposes. The Panel is of the view that any changes to existing practices could and should be accommodated within the current or planned budget provision.
- 6.2 It was noted that within the current year budget of £178,450 a sizeable amount is allocated to the production and distribution of the Homing In publication. The question needing to be addressed is "would the cost of producing quarterly news to residents/tenants be better spent on other and more engaging forms of communication and yield a better outcome?" The Panel came to the conclusion that it would.
- 6.3 The budget for tenant participation represents £15.80 for each of the Council owned properties or the equivalent of about half of a parish councils' annual precept per property. In terms of dedicated TP Team staff time, this represents 0.5 hours per annum for each Council household.
- 6.4 As to whether any of the above represents value for money or how it compares to other local authorities remains unanswered and should be the subject for further scrutiny.

7 Non-Housing Engagement

- 7.1 Research has shown that effective communication with the customer is essential to any business. Millions of £pounds are spent by the private sector to gain knowledge on their customer base and their characteristics. In comparison the Council has scant knowledge on who lives in its properties. Although the Council has a profile of properties it does not have readily available information on the occupancy in terms of family profiles.
- The Councils Data Observatory gathers demographic information and the Councils Housing department has to submit to Government Office information on the tenant profile for each property it allocates in the form of a CORE return (Continuous Recording). Staff also have a great deal of local knowledge on the characteristics of households. All this information is an under used resources that could be used to shape a communication strategy.
- 7.2 To have access to this information is considered essential in order to shape surveys and the best contact methods with particular residents/tenants.

8 Formal Communication

- 8.1 The Council offers a range of opportunities to residents to be involved in the more formal mechanisms for engagement. In the Councils Partnership Agreement, the Tenant Forum is depicted as central to the structure surrounded by sub-groups and recognised tenant bodies. The elected Tenant Forum Committee is used by the Council as the main body for consultation purposes.

- 8.2 An analysis last year showed that around half of attendees at the Forum do not return after their first or second meetings. As a possible consequence the Forum Committee has historically comprised the more "experienced" and same tenants. This, together with the perceived importance of the Forum relative to its Committee, may be an indicator as to why new attendees do not continue to support the Forum. The investigation carried out by TPAS and referred to in its report, warns against councils relying on the views of the same few tenants and the perceived view of "usual suspects". The Council should be mindful of this national tendency.
- 8.3 An alternative for consideration is the model used in other councils whereby the base membership of a Forum is made up of representatives from recognised associations and community representatives. The flow of new attendees at the Forum and its Committee is then more likely to increase.

9 Focus Group

The Tenant Forum is considered to be the appropriate body for this purpose. As part of the annual report on the activities of the Panel, the Forum's opinion was sought on the three areas of communication being examined. A small number of the draft report were also handed to some Committee members and other residents. The feedback from the two responders supported the findings of the Report. The only area of concern for one responder was methods used to profile tenant occupancy but this has been clarified. The Scrutiny Panel would have liked the opinion of a much wider group and suggests that when approved the Report should be distributed to every tenant on the Councils TP mailing list for comment.

10 Regulatory Standards

- 10.1 The current regulatory standards relating to tenant involvement are set out in the Government Regulatory Tenant Involvement and Empowerment Standards. Basically, the standards require engagement to be comprehensive, relevant and meaningful.
- 10.2 However, as referred to earlier, the 2018 Green Paper is designed to bring about changes to empower residents/tenants and ensure that their views are heard so that landlords can be held to account. Councils having an effective communication strategy with its tenants will be therefore vital.

11 Recommendations

- 11.1 The value of estate walkabouts as a direct and engaging means of communicating with Residents of all ages should be reconsidered. If reinstated the frequency and purpose should be published in advance.
- 11.2 The Council has a range of methods and opportunities to exchange information with tenants. Most are generic and not designed to target a particular client group. Communication would become more meaningful and productive if tailored to suit the recipient.
- 11.3 For operating purposes, the Council needs to better know who lives in its properties. To have this information is vital to effective communication. The Council's Housing Strategy team should inform the Tenant Forum how best this can be archived.

- 11.4 Opportunities are being missed to engage and exchange information with tenants. Activities are not being co-ordinated with different council departments. There needs to be a more holistic approach to the exchange of information with tenants in a form that is tailored and likely to be better received. Staff should be trained in effective communication and tenants should be included in the exercise.
- 11.5 The Council's digital strategy needs to be explained to the Tenant Forum as evidence shows that 20% of the UK population (11 million) are not online or lack digital skills. The prediction is that in ten years' time 6.8 million people will still not have internet access predominantly amongst the socially excluded and the elderly. This is particularly relevant in the East Riding especially for occupants of remote properties with limited access to Customer Service Centres.
- 11.6 The joint working group with neighbouring councils and tenant groups with shared best practice objectives needs to be resurrected. Inevitably tenants will compare and contrast services and published information with their friends, colleagues and family, and judge their council accordingly.
- 11.7 The role of the Tenant Forum in its current format is in need of an overhaul as in practice it is now mainly used as a means to present information rather than used for consultation purposes. Communication about important issues should take place at a less formal and local level so that communities are more engaged and feel influential. Their views should then be percolated upwards for consideration by the Forum or specific groups if necessary.
- 11.8 The value of issuing the quarterly Homing In news needs to be evaluated. One edition should be sufficient for the publication of Performance Indicators but it should also publicise and demonstrate the successes through resident/tenant involvement. "If you don't publicise achievement, how do people know they have succeeded?"

12 Acknowledgement

The Panel would like to thank and acknowledge the help and assistance provided by Nikki Bloor, Bob Blair and the rest of the Council's Tenant Participation Team. Also, the information from other Councils and organisations, particularly the Joseph Rowntree Foundation and TPAS.

Footnote: Not totally connected to the production of this report is the issue of providing training for Panel members so that they are better equipped to carry out other examinations.

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