

CABINET (HOUSING) COMMITTEE

30 SEPTEMBER 2015

TENANT INVOLVEMENT AND EMPOWERMENT

REPORT OF ASSISTANT DIRECTOR (CHIEF HOUSING OFFICER)

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RECENT REFERENCES:

None

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

This paper provides an overview of the current tenant involvement opportunities for Council tenants and Leaseholders. It details some of the limitations with the current involvement options and issues regarding wider involvement and tenant representation. The report recommends adopting a more systematic approach to tenant involvement and consultation with the aim of using targeted surveys to ensure a more representative response from all tenants, particularly in relation to key policy development and service review.

The success of existing involvement methods and in particular the work of TACT is well recognised. The proposals contained in this report do not seek to replace the role of TACT, but to supplement it to provide all tenants the means to get involved, no matter what time and other restrictions they may face.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- 1 That the range of existing involvement activities be noted.
- 2 That Cabinet (Housing) Committee support the proposal to implement more targeted surveys of tenants to identify priorities and to provide a more representative response to proposals for change and service development.

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DETAIL:

1. Introduction

- 1.1 Involving tenants in business planning and service delivery has for many years been a key objective of the Council's landlord service. As the regulator for Social Housing, the Homes and Communities Agency (HCA) set a very clear expectation in relation to Resident Involvement and Empowerment, stating that "Registered Providers shall ensure that tenants are given a wide range of opportunities to influence and be involved in, including:
- a) the formulation of their landlord's housing related policies and strategic priorities
 - b) the making of decisions about how housing related services are delivered, including the setting of service standards
 - c) the scrutiny of their landlord's performance and the making of recommendations to their landlord about how performance might be improved
 - d) the management of their homes, where applicable
 - e) the management of repair and maintenance services, such as commissioning and undertaking a range of repair tasks, as agreed with landlords, and the sharing in savings made, and
 - f) agreeing local offers for service delivery".
- 1.2 The City Council recognises that gaining views from tenants is vital to obtain an understanding of tenants' needs and aspirations and to constantly enhance and improve services.
- 1.3 Housing Services have in previous years been particularly successful in ensuring tenants are consulted and have a direct input into service development. TACT (Tenants and Council Together) has always been the main source of consultation and involvement although a range of other opportunities for involvement are offered. Unfortunately the number and profile of involved tenants is a concern, particularly the representation of working age tenants. With a number of key service challenges ahead, such as the introduction of Universal Credit , the preparation of an Asset

Management strategy and the recent government directives around reducing social housing rents, Housing Services will need the input of as many tenants as possible in its decision making processes in these and other business areas.

- 1.4 It's recognised that the housing service will need to do more to reach and involve more working age tenants. At the moment it is generally the same tenants contributing to most issues and it is accepted that we need to try other ways to reach the tenants who for whatever reason, do not currently wish to engage with us.
- 1.5 This report sets out the main ways tenants can be involved in their housing service at the moment and the resources directed to this area of the business. It then considers some new involvement opportunities and our intended approach to try and engage more tenants in forthcoming decision making and service delivery.

2. STAR Tenant Satisfaction Survey

- 2.1 The City Council undertake the formal Survey of Tenants and Residents (STAR) survey every two years. Whilst no longer a mandatory requirement by the HCA, the survey does always provide valuable information on the views of tenants, what they see as most important and a systematic view of tenant opinion. The last three surveys have included additional questions aimed at testing tenant opinion on potential service changes. This approach informed the current Discretionary Works scheme. The last survey also included open questions on tenant opinion regarding the Repairs service and this information is currently being analysed as part of service development proposals.
- 2.2 The STAR survey is analysed in detail to ensure a fair, even and representative response from tenants. It targets 30% of all tenants each year and aims to achieve a good mix of all ages, geographical areas, etc.
- 2.3 Most survey questions are designed to allow comparisons with previous years and other landlords and scope to use the survey to consult on all new policy and service proposals is very limited.

3. Current Formal Involvement Opportunities

- 3.1 The City Council currently has two full time Tenant Involvement Support Officers who are responsible for carrying out, developing and promoting tenant involvement activities. The Tenant Involvement Support Officers work with many of the teams within Housing Services as well as other Council departments and partner agencies to create and deliver opportunities for tenants to influence and shape housing services.
- 3.2 The Housing Revenue Account also funds a Tenant Involvement budget to support and maintain tenant involvement. In addition to covering the costs of

the Tenant Involvement Support Officers, the budget pays for items such as tenant training, venue hire and out of pocket expenses for tenants including transport costs.

- 3.3 The main formalised ways which tenants can be involved at the present time are as follows.
- a) Tenants and Council Together, TACT - TACT is the formal district wide tenant and leaseholder consultative forum which comprises of tenants who represent the areas in which they live, Councillors and senior officers. They meet once a month and work in partnership with the Council to improve the housing service for all tenants. TACT also has formal representation on all council committees and meetings that discuss, approve and scrutinise housing related issues. TACT was originally established as a means of bringing together representatives of resident groups across the district. However, this link to wider representation is not as strong as it once was and whether TACT is fairly representative of all tenant views across the district is debatable. This year TACT celebrated their 20th Anniversary, they have launched their new constitution, logo and committee. Although, it's very early days for the new committee they are keen to build on previous successes and encourage a wider and more representative TACT group.
 - b) Tenant & Resident Associations, TARAs - TARAs are community groups established to empower and involve local people in issues that may affect them in their neighbourhood as well as trying to build a sense of community. Winchester used to have a network of TARAs across the district, however there are now just three which meet regularly (Weeke, North Stanmore and Compton).
 - c) Performance Review Groups - Service specific groups have been in existence for many years under a number of guises. Currently Performance Review Groups (PRGs), meet quarterly to monitor key performance indicators for their service area as well as policies, practices and service delivery. Membership of these groups includes members from TACT and other tenants together with officers who work within the specific service area. All of the tenant representatives on the PRGs have attended training to assist them with this role. They continue to question and analyse the performance of Housing Services and are making a difference on behalf of tenants in a number of service areas.
 - d) Scrutiny Groups - Scrutiny groups are usually formed when a PRG highlights a particular issue with performance or a concern is raised about a service which requires more in depth investigation. The group should act as a task and finish group in that there is an end date to their investigation, concluding with a report of their findings and

recommendations. There are currently three scrutiny groups in operation (Landscape, Liberty – Gas Servicing and Tenant Finance).

- e) Mystery Shopping - Tenants carry out mystery shopping exercises from the comfort of their own home testing whether services meet necessary standards.
- f) Readers Panel - Tenants check documentation sent out by Housing Services, for examples leaflets and letters, to ensure they are in plain English and are in a format that makes them understandable.

3.4 All involvement opportunities require a reasonable level of commitment by tenants. Unfortunately many tenants find it difficult to attend regular meetings due to their own commitments and therefore these options are generally not favoured by working age tenants.

4. Other Non Formal Involvement Opportunities

4.1 Housing Services also provide a number of non formal involvement opportunities.

- a) Community Events - These events are held to provide more information about the housing service, promote tenant involvement and the benefits of getting involved, all carried out in a fun, friendly and informal environment. This year we have refreshed the Street Meet events to make them more beneficial and welcoming events; we now have more robust and professional resources and more buy in from colleagues across the Housing Service and Neighbourhood Services which has made these events much more worthwhile for tenants. Street Meets took place at 14 locations around the district with over 100 queries raised and dozens of small scale estate improvements put forward by tenants attending the events, a number of which have already been taken forward. At some of the larger events we incorporated a Community Action Day and/or children's activities such as a mobile farm, which was really popular and well received. We will be holding more Street Meets in different locations next financial year.

Other events that Housing Services have organised or have taken part in include Half Term Football Tournaments with over 200 children taking part, consultation events at Winnall and Stanmore for estate improvements, Access all Areas with over 500 11 to 16 year olds attending the three events in Winchester, a Christmas event for young people run in partnership with KAYAC and A2Dominion, a Sheltered Housing conference with over 75 tenants from older persons housing schemes coming together to debate the changes to the Sheltered Housing service, a National Takeover Day where young people from local schools took over various teams within Housing Services for the day.

- b) Training - It is important that a wide range of training sessions are offered to tenants to enable them to increase their skills, knowledge and understanding in their involvement of housing related issues. The focus for this years tenant training programme is digital inclusion, financial inclusion and health. These areas link to the housing service business plan as well as the corporate priorities. To date we have delivered eight IT drop in sessions to assist tenants with basic computer skills and have a programme for the remainder of the year to cover a number of areas around financial inclusion and health. Moving forward we would like to take a more flexible approach to training by utilising local training establishments and linking in with our colleagues at Southampton City Council and The Communities National Resource Centre. This will allow us to offer more choice and doesn't restrict us by having to fill spaces by running all of the courses in house.
 - c) On the House/Tenant Voice and Social Media - All tenants and leaseholders currently receive twice yearly publications of On the House and Tenants News which let tenants know about what is happening in the housing service as well the wider Housing arena. We also use Face Book to let tenants know what is happening and provide updates on various matters.
- 4.2 These non formal involvement opportunities do tend to better received by a wider range of tenants. Moving forward we would like to build on the success of these opportunities by offering more involvement and investment at a local level.
5. Targeted Surveys and Other Tenant Involvement Opportunities
- 5.1 It is recognised that we need to make it as easy as possible for all tenants to express their views through formats which are best suited to them and in issues which they have a particular interest in. It is unlikely that this can be achieved through formal representative meetings alone and it is therefore recommended that the City Council adopt a more systematic approach to tenant consultation, through targeted surveys, to ensure that a more representative view of all tenants can be obtained, particularly in relation to key service developments, new policies and in identifying local service offers and business plan priorities.
 - 5.2 If members support this approach, it will be possible to include commentary on the wider tenant view, not just the views of TACT, in future housing reports on key policy development.
 - 5.3 To promote participation and involvement, it is recommended that the survey approach be supported by a formal incentive scheme, offering small tokens of recognition, such as shopping vouchers for a set number of returns. TACT has never supported any form of reward or incentive for participation,

although this approach has been used with some success for mystery shopping and the Readers Panel.

- 5.4 Whilst the majority of tenants do not wish to be involved in formal meetings and similar involvement methods, it is likely that many would be prepared to give their views to more regular short surveys on key topics. It is therefore planned to send Tenant involvement questionnaire to all tenants informing them of the ways they can be involved in their Housing Service and promoting wider involvement, particularly through future surveys. The questionnaire will also ask them to let us know which types of opportunities are of interest to them. Responses to the questionnaire will be kept on a database managed by the Tenant Involvement team. When officers are looking for a tenant view on a particular service or issue they will use the database to identify and then approach those tenants who have given a commitment to responding to survey questions on particular issues or to be more positively involved in other ways. It's hoped that this more targeted approach to involvement will yield far better responses and interest from tenants.
- 5.5 In addition to the survey approach, it is also planned to promote involvement through:
- a) Visits to new working age tenants - From October 2015 the Tenant Involvement team will be aiming to visit all new tenants living in our general needs accommodation during their introductory tenancy period to welcome them to tenant involvement and to explain the opportunities available. By completing these visits we hope to encourage more tenants to become involved in the Housing Service in a way that is convenient and appeals to them as individuals. We would like to raise the profile of tenant involvement and help match tenants to involvement opportunities which best suit them.
 - b) Focus groups - For those times where more detail is required on a particular service or subject area, officers will look to invite tenants to a focus group. Focus groups are informal one off meetings involving a small group of tenants, between 6 to 12, with a facilitator who would get tenants to discuss and feedback on a specific topic.
 - c) An Annual Tenant Conference - On the 12th March 2016 we will be holding a Tenant Conference with local and national speakers. The Conference will include information on the latest updates from central government on Welfare Reform and Rent Setting, the latest tenant training opportunities and more. In an attempt to attract one of our largest audiences to date we will be offering a buffet and a separate children's area. We have already begun publicising the event and hope to make this an informative and fun event.

OTHER CONSIDERATIONS:

6. COMMUNITY STRATEGY AND PORTFOLIO PLANS (RELEVANCE TO):

6.1 Promoting Tenant Involvement is a key priority in the Housing Portfolio Plan and Housing Revenue Account Business Plan. It is also essential as part of achieving the Council priority for promoting Active Communities.

7. RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS:

7.1 The cost of the Council's resident involvement activities are met from the HRA. If an approach that gives less emphasis on formal structures but greater focus on tenant surveys and less formal involvement activities is approved as recommended, it will be necessary to review existing budgets.

7.2 However, at this stage, it is considered appropriate to fund any works through existing budgets. Proposals for developing incentive payments will be contained within existing resources as will all new involvement and engagement initiatives. Every opportunity will be taken to make use of existing systems and the new Community Space system currently being implemented across the Council to ensure survey costs are kept to a minimum.

8. RISK MANAGEMENT ISSUES

8.1 Whilst the Council undertakes a range of involvement activities, it would struggle to evidence that views and opinions obtained through those activities fairly represent the views of all tenants, other than through the limited amount of formal surveys currently undertaken. The proposals in this report seek to address the risk that current involvement does not properly reflect tenant opinion.

9. TACT COMMENT

9.1 The new TACT chair and committee were only appointed on 16 September and it has not been possible to formally consult them on the report. TACT has however been directly involved in developing most of the options highlighted in the paper and undertake a fundamental role at the heart of tenant involvement in Winchester.

9.2 TACT will be represented at the Committee meeting.

BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS:

None