

ROTHERFED TENANT SCRUTINY



SUMMARY REPORT



For presentation to Rotherham Council
April 2017



The first investigation for RotherFed Tenant Scrutiny focussed on the engagement of younger tenants. This topic was selected as it had been established that younger tenants, aged between 16 and 34, were on the whole more dissatisfied with their landlord's services. The 2016 STAR survey of tenants and residents found that 28% of tenants under 35 were dissatisfied with their landlord listening to their views and acting upon them. This compared to only 18% dissatisfied across other age groups.

This report summarises the findings of the investigation including the recommendations made by the panel and the evidence leading to these conclusions being drawn.

Terms of Reference

Aim: To consider how to improve the engagement of young council tenants aged 16 to 35 years old in Rotherham.

Objectives:

To find out:

- Why younger tenants aren't engaging with their landlord.
- How younger tenants would like to be engaged with housing services, if at all.
- Why some younger tenants are dissatisfied with housing services.

To suggest how to:

- Improve the engagement of younger tenants and their satisfaction with housing services.
- Shape the future tenant involvement offer for younger tenants.
- Potentially improve the STAR survey results for satisfaction of young tenants that their landlord:
 - listens to their views and acts upon them,
 - gives them opportunity to make their views known, and
 - keeps them informed.

ROTHERFED TENANT SCRUTINY



Scope:

The panel decided to include all groups of younger tenants under 35 years of age; younger single tenants and young families.

Methodology:

The investigation included:

- Meetings with council officers and with younger tenants.
- Two surveys of younger tenants asking questions around how involved they felt, the support they received and what would motivate them to become more engaged.
- Benchmarking Rotherham Council's services and social media against other UK housing providers.
- Consideration of national guidance on the engagement of younger tenants from Chartered Institute of Housing, Tenant Participation Advisory Service Wales, and Shelter.

KEY FINDINGS

The panel has prioritised its recommendations and the supporting evidence for each finding is listed:

Recommendation A:

Provide support to RotherFed in the development of a forum for younger tenants.

The Evidence:

- Currently there is minimal involvement of younger tenants in some Tenant and Resident Association (TARA) meetings across Rotherham. Quite often younger people come along to meetings once, but do not return as there were no other people of a similar age there.
- Two thirds of young people responding to the first survey said that they would like to be involved in a forum for young tenants. The main reasons for getting involved were to be able to solve local issues, resolve things for other people and get to know other people.
- Housing officers felt that younger tenants would become more involved if groups were created around engaging activities specifically for younger people. Meetings with incentives such as food and free transport encouraged involvement.
- *'Shelter'* suggests that younger tenant involvement is more successful if you can tailor existing successful interventions or if you use a forum specifically for younger people.
- *'The Chartered Institute of Housing' (CIH)* states that 'co-creation' principles should be adopted so that tenants are involved directly in the design and development of their own services.
- There is already some interest in a forum at Rush House so this could be the appropriate place to start developing a group.
- Development of the forum needs to be swift to ensure that survey respondents did not lose interest in this idea.
- The forum should maximise opportunities for young people to get involved by organising meetings and questionnaires/ consultations.

Full report page numbers 20-21

Recommendation B:

Provide suitable training for all council staff coming into contact with younger tenants, particularly in the need to show mutual respect and empathy.

The Evidence:

- From national guidance on engaging younger tenants, *'Shelter'* advises that residents should be encouraged to value and respect each other. *'TPAS Wales'* also states that young people's opinions and values should be respected.
- Attendees at the Pizza, Chips and Chat event shared their experiences of visiting council offices. On the whole staff were found to be polite but two people felt patronised and had a problem with staff looking at their screens instead of them. One person said *'It's as if we're inferior, like we should know things without being told.'* The experience left most people feeling angry.
- The follow-on survey found that one of the most important things for young people when considering an increase in their involvement is to feel that they are being listened to.
- During one meeting, a housing officer commented that *'You are more blunt with young people'*.
- Council officers expressed that *'Face to face contact with tenants is the most important asset we have to engage with younger tenants'*. They acknowledged that there may be issues with other council staff in how they speak to young people.
- People listening properly was one of the top motivations to get involved in the first survey. It was also the top tip from younger people for engaging with them. Lack of confidence was the main reason for not getting involved.

[Full report page 10-12 and 21-23](#)

Recommendation C:

Develop a menu of involvement opportunities for younger tenants and share this with both council staff and tenants.

The Evidence:

- Preference for a range of engagement methods was demonstrated in both surveys carried out as part of the investigation. Email tended to be the best option for contact (39% in the second survey) but preferences between texts, phone calls, face to face contact, meetings/events and online networking and letters were all equal.



- It was felt that digital development programmes should be cautious not to exclude those tenants who prefer other contact methods. Two of the respondents to the second survey (22%) did not have access to Wi-Fi and only four of the other respondents had Wi-Fi at home (44%).
- At the Pizza, Chips and Chat event, two out of the six attendees did not have access to Wi-Fi at home and one young person requested that any consultations are not only displayed online but are also sent through the post for those without internet access.
- Council officers confirmed that **20%** of tenants in Rotherham do not have access to an email account. Younger tenants confirmed that the cost of home internet restricts them from using digital services as much as they would like.
- It was agreed that there needs to be a full range of opportunities available for younger tenants to become engaged with housing services and their communities.

[Full report page 13-15](#)

Recommendation D:

Review all council documents, in particular those produced by housing services, to make them easier to understand for younger tenants. These should be tested out by young volunteers.

The Evidence:

- At the Pizza, Chips and Chat event young people were asked to look at four council documents to check for plain language and to say how they rated them out of five stars. The Tenancy Agreement scored well at four stars, but the other documents scored less well with the Homelessness Strategy at two and a half stars, Local Lettings Policy at two stars and Annual Report at three stars.
- One comment received from an attendee was that three of the documents contained too many statistics and needed to be shortened.
- Another person commented that the layout and pictures in the annual report were good.
- Panel members would like to have seen plain language in all publications and would encourage the practice of young people testing documents out during drafting.

[Full report page 18](#)

Recommendation E:

Evaluate the new tenant workshops being introduced in April 2017 with younger tenants and make improvements as necessary to the format and content.

The Evidence:

- The council officers that were interviewed felt that getting into your new home can be a very quick process. People are desperate to get a home and don't tend to read the contract in detail. However it takes much more time to acquire the skills to manage it which may lead to failed tenancies.
- 'Shelter' suggests that housing providers run pre-tenancy courses including rights and responsibilities, policies and tenancy conditions, communication, confidence and skills.
- Other areas such as Stockport Homes and Stonham Warrington run pre-tenancy courses successfully for younger and vulnerable tenants.
- Prior to this investigation a tenancy agreement DVD had been made and was shown to new tenants to explain their responsibilities to them.
- Two thirds of young people responding to the follow-up survey said that they would have liked to attend a New Tenants' course.
- Rotherham Council are designing a weekly course for new tenants to be run in conjunction with RotherFed to include checks that people will be able to cope with a tenancy and also to share information with them on the requirements of the tenancy agreement and key contacts.
- The panel were pleased with the development of pre-application courses for new tenants but were keen for the course to be evaluated and adapted as necessary as it was progressed.

[Full report page 25-27](#)

Recommendation F:

Ensure that the tenancy support team approach is working well and increase awareness of this service by making it clear what the benefits of the service are to younger/new tenants.

The Evidence:

- Lack of confidence was one of the main reasons that younger people gave for not getting involved.



- Five out of six of the Pizza, Chips and Chat attendees found their experiences of contacting the Council frustrating and patronising.
- The follow-on survey results found that being listened to was really important to younger tenants.
- Nearly half of the respondents commented that their housing officers had been really helpful and caring during the sign-up process, emphasising the need for extra support in many cases.
- 'Shelter' recommends that advice and support officers specifically for younger people should be provided.
- The panel were aware that a dedicated young people's team (such as the one provided by St Leger Homes) would be ideal for making more young people feel engaged. However, members agreed that with limited resources this would be difficult.
- Rotherham Council offers a Tenancy Support team to help new and existing tenants to manage and sustain their tenancies. Their work focusses on many younger tenants.
- The panel were pleased that a team was available to support people with their new tenancies. However discussion at their meetings found that very few people were aware of the tenancy support team.

[Full report page 10-11 and 21-24](#)

Recommendation G:

Make sure that all younger tenants know who their housing officer is and how to contact them, by:

- **Including points of contact for relevant teams in the new tenant packs and explaining the services they provide.**
 - **Introducing a system of notifying tenants of any changes to their neighbourhood housing officer, ideally through the newsletter or mail system.**
- From the follow-up survey, a third of respondents did not know who their housing officer was.
 - 'TPAS (Tenants Participation Advisory Service) Wales' states young people are results orientated and will not wait for bureaucracy.
 - 56% of survey respondents said that they were more likely to get involved if people would listen to them properly and act quicker to their requests.

- Panel members did however feel that it was important for all tenants to know who their housing officer was as a first point of contact. This would particularly be useful to build confidence in younger tenants.
- Officers were asked if they had any examples of how barriers with younger tenants could be broken down. One officer said that *'Face to face contact with tenants is the most important asset we have to engage with younger tenants'*. Another officer said that young tenants have to speak to three different housing officers during their sign-up. They went on to say *'It would be better if younger tenants saw the same person during their early tenancy to build rapport and confidence'*.
- The follow – up survey found that the majority of young people expected to be called back on the same day if they called the council offices. This would be more likely to happen if there was some rapport between the officer and tenant.

[Full report pages 21-24](#)

Recommendation H:

Consider the use of training sessions in schools to raise awareness of the implications of renting your own home, including responsibilities and financial awareness.

- *'Shelter'* recommends that housing providers run training sessions in high schools for training potential young tenants, for example in assessing housing expectations, causes of homelessness, leaving home, and skills needed to live independently.
- Numerous other housing providers run successful schemes in schools e.g. West Kent, Stockport, Dumfries and Galloway, and Kirklees to develop life skills and talk about future housing ambitions.
- The panel felt that younger people would be more engaged if they had received training/ information at an earlier age to help them to become a responsible tenant.

[Full report page 29](#)

Recommendation I:

Develop the Home Matters newsletter to make it more 'young person' friendly by incorporating a young tenants section or similar.

- The first survey of younger people found that 59% of respondents did *not* read the Home Matters magazine.
- Comments received at the Pizza, Chips and Chat event included that the magazine was too brief and that they wanted to see more stories about younger people, local communities and events.

- Panel members would like communications officers to try to include more stories that are relevant to younger tenants or to consider developing a magazine specifically for people under 35 years of age.

[Full report page 19](#)

Recommendation J:

Improve the council website by making:

- The website more accessible and attractive to younger people.
- The Home Matters magazine available on the website.

- At the Pizza, Chips and Chat event, young people were asked what they thought of the Rotherham Council website and asked to score different aspects of it out of five stars; the look and speed of the website scored three stars whereas the accessibility (ability to read and understand it) scored only two stars.
- At the same event, young people were asked to rate how easy the website was to use for various tasks, again scoring out of five stars; Applying for a council house scored highly at four and a half stars, but reporting a repair, public consultations and moving out notifications only score between one and two stars.
- The panel compared the websites from other housing providers to the Rotherham Council website and many were found to be easier to navigate and clearer/ more attractive, including Stockport Homes, St Leger Homes and North Kesteven District Council.
- Officers reported that the Home Matters magazine is produced on a quarterly basis and circulated to all tenants. The majority are sent by post with a smaller number being circulated by email to those requesting electronic information at sign-up.
- Some residents are not receiving the magazine and it does not appear on the Rotherham Council website (it was available on the RotherFed website).
- An electronic version of the magazine being made available on the council website would make it more accessible to all tenants.

[Full report pages 17 and 19](#)

Recommendation K:

Review the social media used for engaging with tenants, introducing ways of developing tenant consultations and keeping in touch through platforms such as Facebook and Twitter.

- *'TPAS Wales'* found that younger people preferred to take part in consultations and market research. *'Chartered Institute of Housing'* suggests having a database of interested tenants who are prepared to be consulted as and when required. They also suggest using online consultations.
- Other housing providers such as Dumfries and Galloway and North Lincolnshire Homes use tenant consultations to get the views of interested tenants, either by circulating paper questionnaires or by online surveys.
- Council officers were unable to provide any statistics on how many younger people were accessing social media pages.
- At the Pizza, Chips and Chat event, young people scored their opportunity to take part in public consultations as only one star out of five.
- Young tenants responding to the survey said that they would mostly like to have more say about housing services through online networking and surveys (30%).

[Full report page 13 and 16-17](#)

Recommendation L:

Develop a 'Tell Us Once' service for new council tenants, whereby they only have to inform one agency of their move. This information should then be shared with Council Tax, Benefits and Housing officers as appropriate.

- During one of the council officer meeting it was reported that younger people struggle during sign-up with the number of different agencies that they need to notify. Support for young tenants is available through the tenancy support team and through Rush House.
- During this survey, young people reported receiving most of their support when setting up their home to be from their families or Rush House. Rush House will assess young people for their readiness to become a tenant, build their confidence and accompany them during the sign-up/ moving in process.

ROTHERFED TENANT SCRUTINY



- Discussions took place with officers about the 'Tell Us Once' scheme used for bereavement services which is used to prevent family members from having to notify lots of different agencies when a loved one has passed away. It was agreed that a similar system may be useful for moving home too, removing some of the stress for new tenants.

[Full report page 27](#)

Recommendation M:

Explore enhancing links with children's centres to monitor the number of council tenants who are engaging with services and how they are signposted to services.

- '*Shelter*' suggests that consideration should be given to family – friendly activities or focussing on existing school events to connect with young families. It goes on to say that younger tenant involvement is more successful if you can tailor existing successful interventions.
- '*TPAS Wales*' advises that meetings should be more participative and should use existing groups.
- There was a feeling that there is a real need to boost the confidence of young people to help them to get more involved. Using existing trusted services for this purpose will provide better results.

[Full report pages 10-12 and 21-23](#)

The full report includes further detail of each recommendation and the related evidence, incorporating 'Panel Views' sections for ease of reading.

Suggested improvement:

1.

Make sure that all Jobcentre Plus staff know how to refer homeless young people through to housing services.

Report produced by:



rebecca.morrisonps@gmail.com

07931 471131

On behalf of



On behalf of:



Springwell Gardens Community Centre, Eastwood View, Rotherham, S65 1NG
info@rotherfed.org Tel: 01709 368515