



## Investigation into how Rotherham Council could improve its communications with tenants



**Report June/July 2022**

**Rotherham Federation**

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## 1. Background

**Rotherham Federation Tenant Scrutiny** was formed in April 2016. The Tenant Scrutiny panel provides an opportunity for tenants to scrutinise and challenge service delivery, identifying areas of concern and opportunities for improvement. This process strengthens the involvement of Rotherham tenants and provides links with Rotherham Council governance.

Tenant Scrutiny creates opportunities to:

- ✓ Build an effective partnership between Rotherham Council and its tenants and residents in the spirit of co-production, resulting in a joint-win for all.
- ✓ Provide a means of challenging landlords' services, standards and performance in a professional, constructive and collaborative manner.
- ✓ Help Rotherham Council to improve performance, value for money and tenant satisfaction.
- ✓ Represent the views of Rotherham Council's residents and make a positive difference on their behalf.

Tenant Scrutiny activity works to the five TPAS Scrutiny key principles:

- Independent
- Inclusive
- Positive
- Constructive
- Purposeful

This is the sixth investigation by the Rotherham Federation Tenant Scrutiny panel. Previous reports have been submitted on the following topics:

1. Engaging Young Tenants in Rotherham (March 2017)
2. Responsive Repairs: Appointments, Communication Process and Customer Journey (February 2018)
3. Process of Dealing with Anti-social behaviour complaints (January 2019)
4. Home Aids and Adaptations for Tenants (November 2020)
5. Improving Tenant Satisfaction with the Repairs and Maintenance Service (June 2021)

## Choice of topic

The Tenant Scrutiny panel was approached in October 2021, following Council discussions in relation to the [Social Housing White Paper \(2020\)](#). In particular:

*Chapter 2: To know how your landlord is performing* – the regulator to introduce a set of tenant satisfaction measures for all landlords to know how they are performing.

Satisfaction will be measured on the things that matter most to tenants, including:

- Tenant satisfaction that their landlord listens to their views and takes notice of them; and
- Tenant satisfaction with landlord's engagement with tenants

*Chapter 5: To have your voice heard by your landlord* – to provide new opportunities and an empowerment programme for social housing residents to support more effective engagement between landlords and residents. Also to give tools for tenants to influence their landlords and hold them to account.

## Measurement of success

With the Charter for Social Housing Residents (White Paper) in mind, the [Rotherham Council plan 2022-2025](#) includes outcomes under the 'One Council' theme that include:

- Effective customer services – residents know we mean what we say, are kept informed and can access the services they need in the way that suits them
- Engaged, diverse and skilled workforce who feel empowered to adopt new ways of working to meet the needs of all customers

Key performance indicators measuring improvement against these outcomes are:

- The proportion of residents who feel that the Council keeps them informed (Target 22/23 – greater than 50%)
- To what extent the Council acts on the concerns of local residents (Target 22/23 – greater than 48%); and
- The average customer wait time for the corporate contact centre (Target 22/23 – 6 minutes).

Measurement of the first two indicators is via the annual residents' satisfaction survey conducted in June each year.

It is the intention of the Tenant Scrutiny panel to make recommendations and suggestions that would help to improve the survey scores.

## 2. The panel and officers

The panel was made up of tenant and resident representatives from across Rotherham:

David Ramsden (Chair)	Julie Sharp	Wendy Birch
Mary Jacques	Sam Sharp	David Silman
Winnie Billups	Jo Workman	Jean Whitmarsh
Ann Hitchens	Keith Stringer	Mohammed Ramzan

Thank you to these representatives for their time and commitment and also to the digital champions who kindly participated in the website challenge and the newsletter survey.

Officer support was provided by:

Asim Munir, RMBC Tenant Involvement Coordinator  
Jessica Sarracco, RMBC tenant Involvement Officer  
Phil Hayes, Rotherham Federation Chief Executive Officer  
Laura Swift, Rotherham Federation Administrative Officer  
Sarah Fletcher, Rotherham Federation, Office Manager  
Kathryn Wild, Rotherham Federation, Project Manager  
Nicola Evans, Rotherham Federation, Volunteers Co-ordinator  
Rebecca Morrison, Project Solutions

Valuable subject matter expertise was provided by five representatives of the Council:

Sue Shelley, Business Development Manager, Housing Service  
Helen Barker, Head of Customer Services  
Nigel Mitchell, Learning and Development Manager  
Phil Rushton, Corporate Contact Centre Manager  
Aidan Melville, Communications and Marketing Manager

### 3. Terms of Reference

**Aim: To investigate how Rotherham Council could improve its communications with tenants**

#### **Objectives:**

##### **To:**

- Consider whether current Council communications meet the needs of all tenants
- Benchmark against other housing providers in terms of how well they communicate with tenants and any examples of good practice
- Agree how communications could be improved across the Council
- Explore how any suggestions made by the panel could contribute to the Social Housing White Paper action plan as regards the information that is available to tenants and how well this is communicated.

#### **Scope**

Prior to the investigation commencing, the panel originally agreed that it would not consider elements of Rotherham Council communications that were already thought to be fully satisfactory. However, the original request from council officers was to consider the Home Matters newsletter and the website.

After further discussion and scoring it was decided that all means of communication would be within scope apart from:

- ☒ the social media elements; as some panel members would have limited experience of using these, and
- ☒ leaflets; as these were not in use at present and were too wide-ranging for this investigation

Due to difficulties with ongoing Covid restrictions it was agreed that the panel would avoid the use of general surveys and instead use panel member views only to assess confidence and satisfaction with existing Council communications.

## Measures of Success

- ✓ Improvements are made to the website, magazine and other forms of communication to meet the needs of all tenants
- ✓ Increased confidence amongst tenants that they are receiving communication that is relevant, clear and is being conveyed via the most suitable medium for them
- ✓ Council tenants are more aware of the Council services that are relevant to them
- ✓ An improved take-up of services
- ✓ An increase in confidence for some tenants to move to digital services
- ✓ A significant evidence-based contribution to the Social Housing White Paper action plan

## Benefits

### For tenants:

- ☑ Communications that are clear, relevant and accessible to all tenants
- ☑ Increased awareness of how to access information that is important to them
- ☑ Improved/increased tenant involvement opportunities
- ☑ Increased confidence in Council communications

### For the Council:

- ☑ Assistance with compliance with the requirements of the Social Housing White Paper as regards tenant satisfaction with communication and information, and treating tenants with respect.
- ☑ Improved communications with all tenants to raise their confidence level in the Council
- ☑ Potential to learn from good practice from other Housing Providers and improve the Council's communication model

## Risks

The panel acknowledged the following risks when embarking on this investigation. That:

- Staff may be unable to attend/take part in tenant scrutiny meetings to share information
- Other Councils may not be forthcoming with information on their communications with tenants
- Rotherham Council team capacity may mean that the recommendations made cannot be applied consistently
- Further COVID restrictions may cause delays to the investigation and prevent any required face-to-face communication

## 4. Methodology

The investigation consisted of:

### 4.1 WhichComms? survey

To prioritise the scope of the investigation, an exercise 'Which comms?' was carried out at the December 2021 meeting. Average scores from the participants were as follows:

Letters	<b>6.5</b> (range 5 to 9)
Website	<b>5.4</b> (range 3 to 7)
Home Matters newsletter	<b>7.6</b> (range 7 to 9)
Leaflets	<b>5.5</b> (range 5 to 6)
Formal meetings	<b>6.8</b> (range 5 to 9)
Social media	Not applicable
Verbal (with Council officers)	<b>4.5</b> (range 1 to 8)

### 4.2 Survey of other housing providers

Early in the investigation, questions were prepared for other housing providers to find out if there were any learning points from their own communications approaches and if there were any examples of innovative practice. The questions asked can be found in Appendix A.

These were emailed out to the contact officers in eleven areas and a request was also made on the TPAS Tenant Scrutiny forum. Responses were received from seven providers:

- ✓ Sheffield
- ✓ Kirklees
- ✓ Hull
- ✓ Berneslai
- ✓ St Leger
- ✓ Nottingham
- ✓ Greatwell (partial response)

### 4.3 Interviewing officers

Senior officers were invited to attend the Tenant Scrutiny meeting on 14 March 2022 to answer questions on the various communication channels, communications strategy and training, management and supervision aspects of the investigation.

Following the meeting, further questions were agreed and sent on to officers to answer by email, which was completed by May 2022.



#### 4.4 Website Challenge

Three tenant scrutiny panel members, two digital champions and one member of Rotherham Federation staff took part in the Website Challenge.

Each participant scored the websites of Kirklees, Nottingham, Sheffield, Warrington, Wigan, Wolverhampton, and Rotherham for:

- ☐ Accessibility
- ☐ Content
- ☐ Navigation
- ☐ Readability
- ☐ Look

They also searched on each website and commented on the ease of finding useful information about:

- ? How to make a complaint/ comment/ compliment
- ? How to get more involved
- ? How to book a repair
- ? How to report littering
- ? How to report Anti-social behaviour
- ? How to apply for a council house

#### 4.6 Newsletter Survey

Feedback on six newsletters from various housing providers was received from two panel members and two digital champions. Participants were asked to score and comment on the newsletters in terms of:

- ? Accessibility
- ? Content
- ? Length
- ? Readability
- ? Look

A range of printed newsletters and e-newsletters were considered from Leeds, Hull, Nottingham, St Leger, Sheffield and compared against the Rotherham Housing newsletter 'Home Matters'.

#### 4.7 Meetings

Meetings took place between November 2021 and June 2022 to consider, analyse and discuss the information received from the various exercises above. The early meetings were held online, with face-to-face meetings being re-introduced from April 2022.

## 5. Summary of Evidence

### 5.1 Communications Strategy



#### Questions to Officers

##### **Communications Strategy**

- *What principles are followed when communicating with Tenants?*
- *Are these documented somewhere?*
- *Do you have a communications strategy that guides the way in which tenants/residents are communicated with?*
- *Are there any groups that are external to the council who are involved in the production of council documents?*

There is currently no communications strategy for Rotherham Council nor specifically for Adult Care, Housing and Public Health services. Communications plans are however available for different specific projects e.g. for the production of the Home Matters magazine.

Council officers stated that there are a number of principles that all Council communications should follow, such as being people-focused and community-led. This means that any publications and communications should include information that:

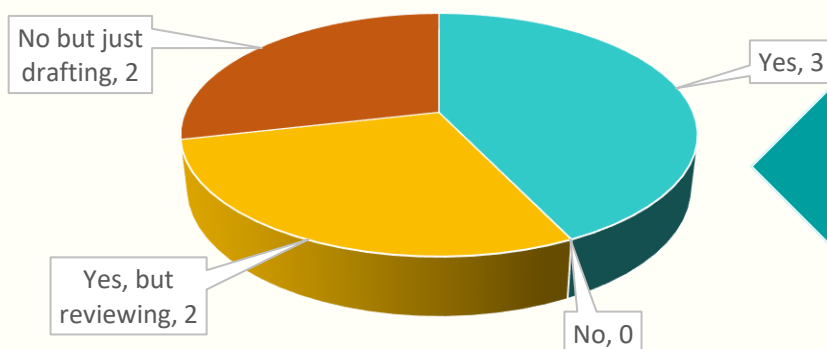
- ✓ Involves people,
- ✓ Is relevant,
- ✓ Is responsive,
- ✓ Is up-to-date, and
- ✓ Reflects the needs and wants of customers

This relates to all areas of the Council and aims to enable and encourage residents and visitors to respond and engage. However, these principles are not yet documented in one place. At the time of meeting with officers, there was a plan to publish these principles for Council staff and to develop a communications strategy.

Whilst the Council engages with external stakeholder groups on a case-by-case basis e.g. for targeted cohorts, this approach is not documented.

## Other Housing Providers

### Do you have a Communications Strategy?



Only three other housing providers had up-to-date Communications Strategies, with four working on drafting or reviewing their strategies

## PANEL VIEWS:

- It was disappointing that Rotherham Council did not have a current Communications Strategy in place.
- However, panel members agreed with the five principles being worked towards by officers.
- The panel was keen for a Communications Strategy and supporting documentation, similar to other housing providers, to be made available. This would help to ensure that all staff and the public understand the principles for engagement and communication.

## Recommendation

### Strategy

Provide an over-arching strategy on how the Council communicates with people living in Rotherham. Inform tenants how Council officers will communicate/ consult with them.

## 5.2 Verbal communications/ staff training and supervision



### Training



#### Questions to Officers

##### **Training/Officer Approach**

- *Is there any training given to housing officers to ensure that they speak to tenants clearly and in a respectful manner?*
- *If so, what is the content of the training, what range of colleagues take part in the training and how frequently does re-training take place?*

Officers agreed that all Council staff, at whatever level, need to be aware of how to speak to people in a caring and understanding way, this includes active listening and empathy. This approach also applies to contract partners and their staff i.e. Mears and Equans.

Panel members raised the issue of some staff needing to improve their sensitivities around bereavement, particularly during telephone conversations. Members of the panel had previously experienced quite insensitive behaviour when reporting bereavements to the Council.

### Current training

Officers reported that a training programme was developed in 2018, which included 'Equalities, Complaints, and Customer Care' training. This programme was a result of the previous tenant scrutiny investigation into how young tenants are engaged with in Rotherham.

There are three key parts to the training:

- Equalities – understanding sub-conscious bias and discrimination
- Complaints – relating to equalities and customer care
- Customer Care – working well with people

This training will be mandatory for all staff going forward.

### Upcoming training

Another new training course is soon to be introduced that focuses on 'Communication'. This will focus on the two-way process of communication i.e. asking questions and listening, as well as speaking.

Work is also ongoing to introduce a new Learning and Development model. This will include a '*training matrix*' with four elements:

- o identifying needs,
- o planning,
- o delivery, and
- o evaluation

'*Training passports*' will be used for each job role, listing:

- o mandatory training which is a requirement of the organisation,
- o statutory training required by law, and
- o developmental training where there is an agreed need identified.

There will be agreed intervals for refresher training.

### Other Housing Providers

Different types of training for staff that was available across other Councils and was relevant to communications included:

- Induction training (including values and behaviours) x 2
- Good Conversations
- How to communicate (in a friendly and conversational style)
- Motivational Interviewing
- Phone coaching
- Equality and Diversity x 2 (one refreshed every three years)
- Telephone skills
- Dealing with complaints
- Customer services x 2
- Mental Health Awareness
- Tenant's Charter
- Tenant videos giving feedback on services circulated to staff
- Journey to Service Excellence' staff newsletter
- Professional standards document

## Supervision



### Questions to Officers

#### Management/Supervision

- *How are the ways in which officers communicate monitored?*
- *How are communications standards maintained?*
- *Do you receive any complaints/ compliments about the way in which officers have communicated with tenants? If so, what do you do as a result of such feedback?*
- *How do you monitor team communications? Do managers ever listen to any recorded 'phone calls? Are these used as part of staff training and supervision? If not, are any spot checks carried out with customers on how they have been communicated with?*

It was reported that concerns about staff communications with Rotherham residents are usually raised through different channels, such as complaints. When received, the concerns are delegated to the relevant service to investigate. If the concern is justified, investigators/ managers will introduce a coaching plan for the member of staff to help them to develop their skills and increase their understanding of how things could have been handled better.

If the attitude of the member of staff remains unacceptable, or similar complaints are received, further supervisory discussions would need to take place.

Call monitoring is undertaken routinely as part of the Contact Centre's quality assessment process. Any learning can then be used to improve skills and future service delivery. These recordings are however not used in any of the formal training courses.

Officers stated that the Council encourages everyone to give feedback about situations so that action can be taken. However panel members informed officers that many people would not want to raise issues or make complaints as they are worried about being treated negatively as a result of this.

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### PANEL VIEWS:



Panel members were happy with the new developments around training and the idea of a training matrix for individual job roles.



The panel was keen that bereavement training should be included in the Council's training programme to help officers to understand how best to conduct these conversations in a sensitive manner.

-  There was an appetite for Rotherham Federation and Tenant Representatives to be involved in the planning of training courses, in particular including some feedback from tenants either in video, in person or in writing.
-  Panel members felt it would be useful to share the learning from the call monitoring exercises more widely with council officers
-  The panel was keen for officers to find ways of reassuring people that it is OK to complain, confirming that feedback is useful for the Council and that there will be no repercussions for them.

## Recommendations

### Staff training

- Work closely with Rotherham Federation representatives to develop training courses on communications/ customer care (This could include videos of tenant feedback/ tenant representative attendance/ listening to customer call recordings).
- Improve the handling of bereavement conversations by incorporating into training courses/ providing staff guidance.

## 5.3 Handling telephone calls



### Questions to Officers

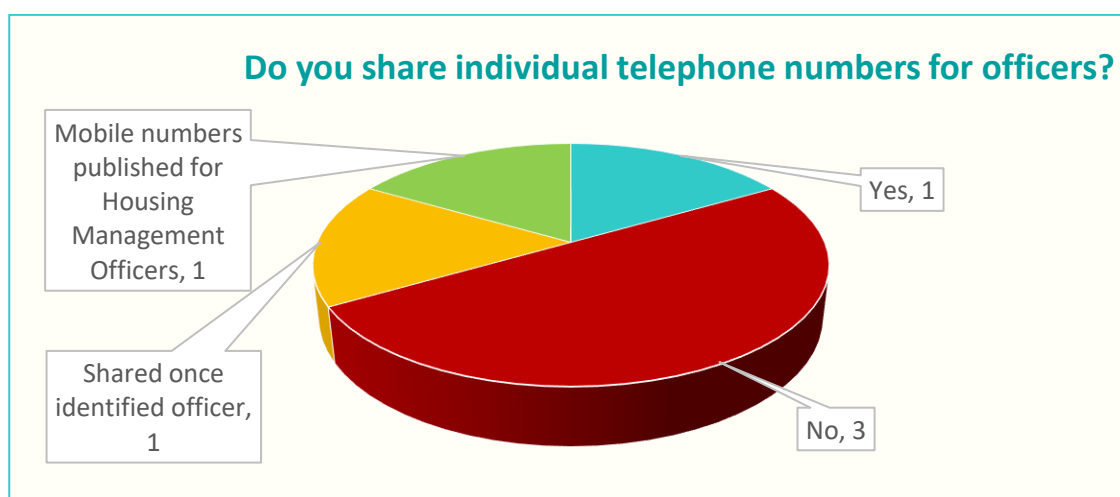
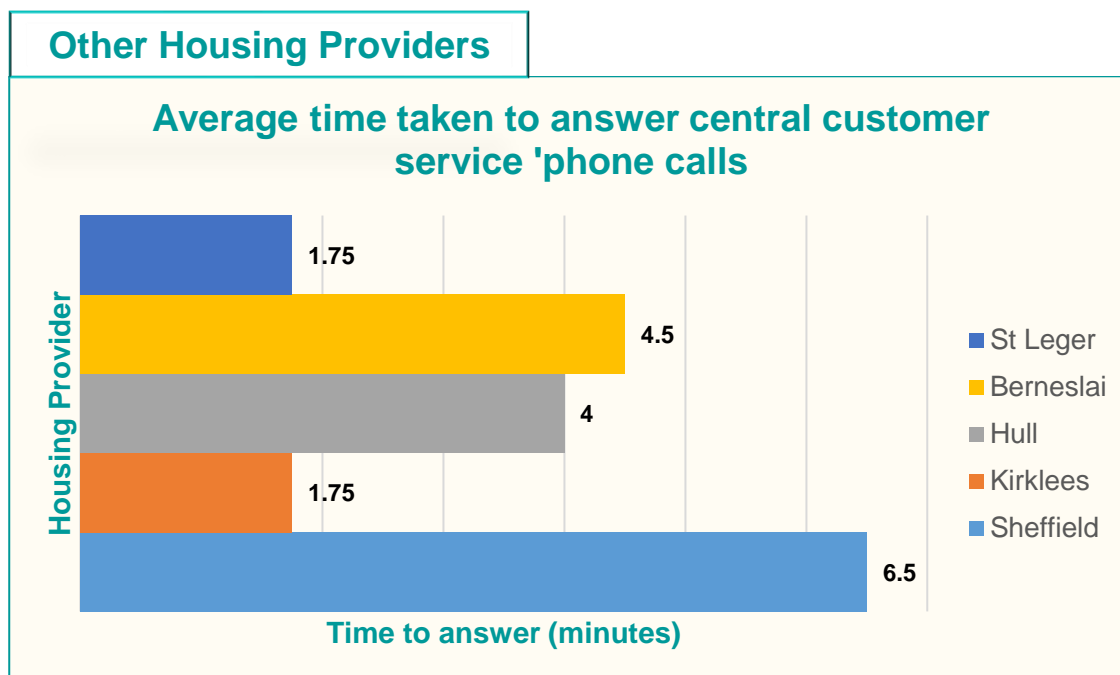
#### Telephone Calls

- *What is the average and range of time taken for calls to be answered through the customer service point?*
- *How are messages forwarded from the customer service centre to the appropriate officer? How do messages go astray (we have received reports that housing officers are saying that they did not receive messages)?*

There have been long queues on the telephone lines over the Covid peak periods and continuing into this year; this has mainly been due to volume and complexity of calls. More people are engaging online, but it is important for the information they need to be available on the website, otherwise they will then 'phone the Council instead.

The Council's 'Year Ahead' plan is to reduce the waiting time on the Council telephone lines to **below six mins** as an average. A new menu option has also been introduced to get people to their destination quicker. A call back system is being trialled for Housing enquiries and repairs where the person's place in the queue is saved and they receive a call back at that time.

Responses from other housing providers gave average times for answering telephone lines as below:







Officers confirmed that some forms completed online do seem to get lost in the system and some messages get lost from the customer service centre. The Council needs to be aware of these incidents as it shouldn't happen; there is a need to track where enquiries are going and where failings are happening.



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## PANEL VIEWS:

-  The panel was reassured by the new innovations being made to the telephone system, particularly the call-back system.
  -  It was good to hear that a six-minute target was being introduced for answering calls. Panel members hoped that the target could be achieved and maybe improved in future years in line with other housing providers.
  -  Similar to the majority of other housing providers, the panel agreed that it wasn't appropriate for direct lines to be made available to callers in the first instance.
  -  It was agreed that more work is needed on tracking messages that are forwarded to officers; perhaps with confirmation messages being sent to customers when their message has been received by the appropriate team/ officer.
- 

### Recommendations

#### Telephone calls

Review the new telephone system and make sure that the target of six minutes to speak to a real person is being met. Ensure that robust measurements are in place to monitor this target and respond to shortfalls going forward.

## 5.4 Website



### Questions to Officers

#### Website

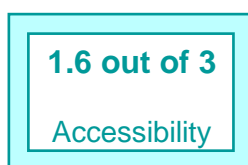
- *How do you make sure that the website is accessible to as many people as possible?*
- *How often do you ask for feedback on the website and what do you do with this information once you have received it?*
- *Webforms – could the time for completion be extended (some time out after 10 minutes) or could there be a save facility?*

WhichComms  
score  
**5.4 / 10**  
Range 3 to 7

## Accessibility

1.5 million people visit the Rotherham Council website each month and accessibility is critical. The bottom of each webpage has accessibility information; showing various links to be able to improve access. Officers were asked about whether Easy-Read pictures were available for the Council to use; however it was confirmed that the Council does not have any current arrangements in place for this specific resource. The principle of using Easy-Read in Council communications was being explored by officers at the time of this investigation.

From the [Website Challenge](#), accessibility was poor across most of the websites except Wolverhampton, Berneslai and Nottingham. Wolverhampton's website accessibility was particularly good as it offered a listen button to have the website read to you; a tool bar to be able to change font size and contrast; a dictionary; and the ability to change languages. These features were all available on the homepage, both at the top and side. The accessibility score for the Rotherham website was:



Accessibility was judged by the availability of different languages and access tools for people with learning disabilities, sight loss or hearing loss. It was noted that the Rotherham website offered different languages, but the links did not work.

Officers have circulated a digital inclusion survey asking people to comment on how they access Council information and what barriers they face such as skills, connectivity and cost. Meetings are also taking place with Sight and Sound groups to explore improving accessibility of the website. Officers were keen to receive ideas to improve access and perhaps examples of how different websites had improved the customer experience.

## Content

Officers reported that there is a facility on the website to share feedback on emails, letters, complaints processes, verbal conversations and the website. In particular, the website option includes what other things website users would like adding to the content.

They also commented that they would like to improve two-way engagement and receive more feedback on the website.

From the [Website Challenge](#), the content score for different housing providers ranged from 1.0 to 2.75 and content was the second worst score for most websites. Berneslai, Nottingham and Dudley scored highest. The content score for the Rotherham website was one of its best scores:



To assess content, participants considered whether the website had all the information they would need as a housing tenant.

### Navigation/Search facility

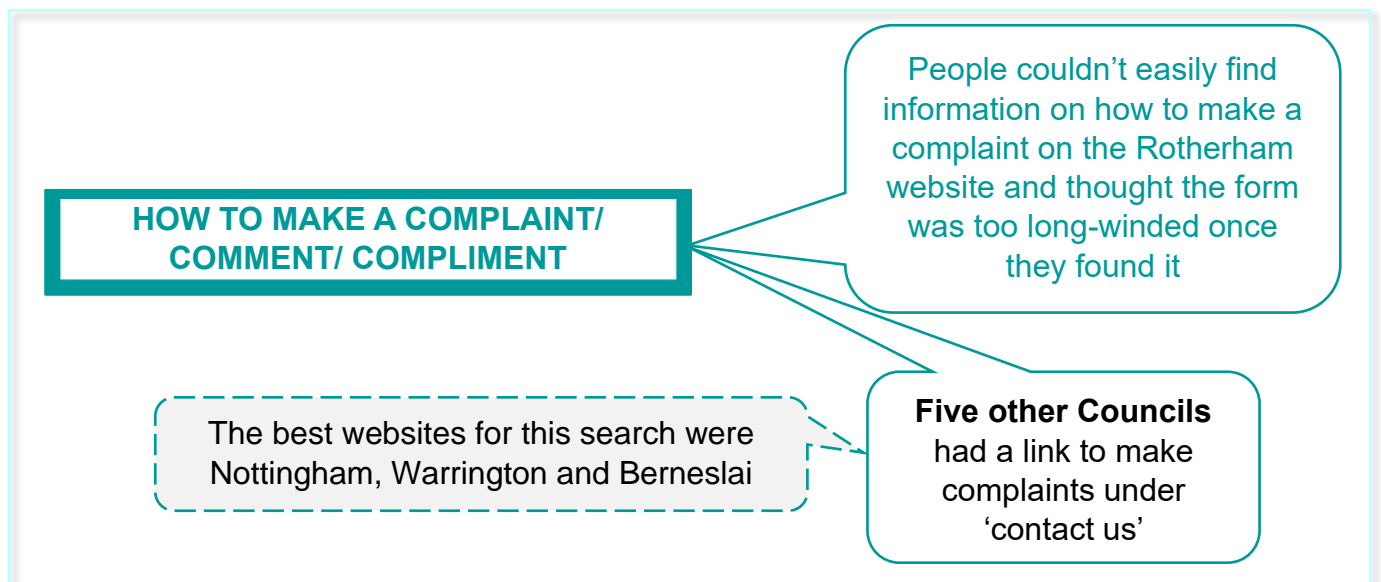
The search facility on the website was reported to have a 98% success rate. Officers were monitoring this and looking at the remaining 2% to find out what people were searching for that couldn't be found e.g. travel plans.

Participants of the *Website Challenge* were asked to search all the listed websites to find out information on:

- ? How to make a complaint/ comment / compliment
- ? How to get more involved
- ? How to book a repair
- ? How to report littering
- ? How to report Anti-social behaviour
- ? How to apply for a council home

The Rotherham website left some people with no answer on all of these searches apart from how to book a repair. This was by far the best part of the website; as it was for other housing providers.

A further breakdown of these searches is summarised below:



One participant commented about how to make a complaint on the Rotherham site:

I couldn't find it anywhere  
– it was not on main page and not under housing  
- I gave up in the end!

Three out of five tenants looking for this information on the Rotherham website thought it was hard to find and had to use the search facility

**Two other Councils** made it easy to find information on getting involved by having links from their main page

The best websites for this search were Berneslai and Nottingham

### HOW TO GET MORE INVOLVED

### HOW TO BOOK A REPAIR

All respondents found this easy on the Rotherham site after following the Housing link.

The best websites for this search were Berneslai, Dudley, Hull, and Kirklees

**Two other Councils** had a link from their main page

This resulted in a lot of searching on the Rotherham website and one person could only find information on litter picks and over-flowing bins.

Most websites were poor for reporting litter, **apart from three**

The best websites for this search were Warrington, Wigan and Sheffield

### HOW TO REPORT LITTERING

Another person talked about trying to find information on reporting littering:

There was nothing on the home page and nothing under environment nor waste nor street care and cleaning.  
I finally found a form to report issues.

### HOW TO REPORT ANTI-SOCIAL BEHAVIOUR

Only one respondent from five found this straightforward on the Rotherham website and two people couldn't find it at all.

The best websites for this search were Sheffield and Warrington

**Two other Councils** had really easy websites to use to find this information

Only one respondent from five found this easily and the others had to use the search facility on the Rotherham website

### HOW TO APPLY FOR A COUNCIL HOUSE

Four Councils had links on their home page to apply for a council home

The best websites for this search were Dudley, Sheffield, Wigan and Kirklees

In terms of navigation, the *Website Challenge* had scores ranging from 2.2 (Rotherham) to 2.8 for Sheffield and 3 for Berneslai.

**2.2 out of 3**

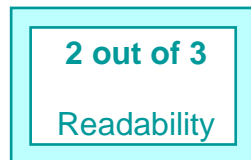
Navigation

Navigation was scored by assessing:

- ? If you reach most of the information you need within 3-5 clicks?
- ? Whether it is clear which buttons and links to use?
- ? Whether it is clear what page you are on at each click?
- ? If the search button is obvious and finds what you are looking for?

### Readability and Look

The *Website Challenge* found that Rotherham again scored fairly low on readability and look. The ranges of scores across other websites were from 2 to 3 for readability, and 1.8 to 3 for look. Rotherham scored the lowest in both categories:



Best scorers for both readability and look were Nottingham and Berneslai.

Readability was judged by how easy the language was to understand on the website and whether there was logical flow. The look of the website was assessed by considering whether it looked attractive and inviting, and if there was consistency across pages.






### Webforms

Tenant Scrutiny members reported a problem with some parts of the website, where webforms were in use. They found that the webform was 'timing out' prior to them being able to complete the form and submit it. They also found that once a webform was submitted, there was little communication from the Council on where the form had been forwarded to, nor progress with the report.

Officers confirmed that there is a security arrangement on webforms which means that they time out after 10 minutes. To avoid this happening, users needed to create an account; allowing them to then save and return to the form as often as needed to complete it. They also informed the panel that automatic updates should be received on progress with webform reports e.g. for bulky waste an automatic reminder is sent on the collection day and confirmation is also sent after collection.

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### **PANEL VIEWS:**

-  The panel was keen for the accessibility on the Rotherham website to be improved, similar to Wolverhampton, with accessibility features available for all website users. In particular, these options should be made available at the top of the home page to avoid people abandoning their use of the website due to accessibility.
-  It was pleasing to hear that incorporating more Easy-Read into Council communications was being explored.
-  It was also encouraging to hear about the digital inclusion work that is underway.
-  Participants in the website challenge were on the whole pleased with the Rotherham website for its content, once they had managed to navigate to it.
-  The Rotherham Council website was the only website to not score a '3 out of 3' for its readability. This was due to the use of some acronyms and jargon.

- Panel members were confident that the look and readability of the website could be improved.
- Although the search button was said to find 98% of requests, website challenge participants struggled to navigate through the website logically without it and used multiple clicks to get to the right information, if at all.
- Panel members were surprised to hear that they needed to sign up for an account before being able to complete webforms at their leisure. Nobody reported having ever been prompted to open an account for this purpose and all members had never seen a communication from the Council making it clear about this arrangement.
- The panel agreed that it would be an improvement to the website if there were messages on webform submissions that confirmed the department that was dealing with the matter, an estimated timescale, and regular updates on progress.
- The panel was keen to raise with officers that not everyone has the confidence to complain or raise issues and that ways to make this easier and more positive for tenants is desirable.

## Recommendations

### Complaints and Compliments

Provide a link tile on the web page to allow people to find information on how to make a complaint/ comment or pay a compliment. Include reassurance on the linked page that it is useful to receive feedback and that there will not be repercussions from making a complaint.

### Website accessibility

- Consider the accessibility of the website by having links at the top of the home page to allow people to adjust the settings to their needs (perhaps similar to Berneslai and Wolverhampton)
- Check and change text on the website that uses acronyms or jargon.

## Suggestion

**Tenant Communications Working Group** – once the website development has commenced and customer advice/ testing is required; it may be useful to set up a temporary working group involving officers and tenant representatives.

## 5.5 Letters



### Questions to Officers

#### Letters

- *How do you ensure that the letters you send are understandable for all recipients including people with specific accessibility needs and other vulnerable tenants?*
- *How is this also checked for Council-related letters e.g. those from contractors working for the Council?*

There are thousands of different letters going out to residents from different council services each year and many of them were first drafted a number of years ago. Council officers acknowledged that there is a need for a lot of work to be carried out to improve the letters currently sent. Officers would like all staff to follow three principles:

- ✓ Easy to read
- ✓ Clear (about what it wants to say and what the recipient needs to know), and
- ✓ Understandable

Standards are being drafted for all council services on how to write letters that follow these principles. These will also include how people can get help if they don't understand the letter. A new style guide is also being developed to help to make language 'plain' and to standardise terminology across services.

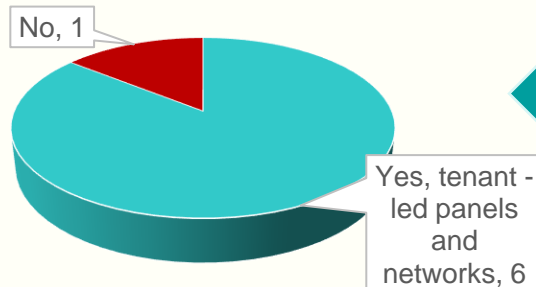
Communications feature in the 'Council's Year Ahead Delivery Plan', working towards the 'One Council' theme. There is a planned outcome to have '*Effective customer services, where residents know we mean what we say, are kept informed, and can access the services they need in the way that suits them*'. Work is planned between April 2022 and December 2023 to meet this outcome.

During the course of the investigation, a letter was sent out to all tenants concerning rent increases. The letter was discussed by the panel and it was agreed that the content and layout was poor and confusing. There was a lot of information in the letter that was complicated and not of interest to a lot of people (perhaps headings for the different sections would have improved the layout and helped people to know which parts of the letter were relevant to them).



## Other Housing Providers

Are letter drafts checked by tenant representatives for plain language/accessibility?



Six of the other housing providers had set up tenant-led groups to check letters and other publications

### PANEL VIEWS:

- ✍ The panel was pleased to hear that work is ongoing to improve letters and that this is one of the Delivery Plan 2022 outcomes
- ✍ More improvements are needed to the content and layout of letters, as was evident in the recent letter about rent increases.
- ✍ It was agreed that the letter-writing standards used by the Council also needed to be rolled-out to contract partners.
- ✍ The panel was keen for officers to consider if tenant representative groups could help to proof-read letters or if other arrangements could be found.

## Recommendations

### Letters

Continue to work through Council letters to make sure that they are understandable and written in plain language for all residents. Have a mechanism in place to review the letter templates with customers.

## 5.6 Newsletter



### Questions to Officers

#### Newsletter

- *Is the Home Matters publication (and other documents) checked by tenant representatives prior to being published?*
- *How do you ensure that the newsletter is understandable for all recipients?*
- *Have we assessed recently how much Home Matters costs to produce? Have we asked recently how people want to receive it?*

WhichComms  
score  
**5.4 / 10**  
Range 3 to 7

Corporate officers were unsure as to the previous involvement of reference panels in the production of the Home Matters newsletter. It was confirmed though that if the newsletter included an item about a specific tenant, they would be consulted on the draft prior to publication. Tenant Involvement officers informed the panel that Rotherham Federation have previously been consulted on the content and language used in Home Matters, and that this arrangement worked well in the past.

All Council publications are proof-read by officers to make sure that:

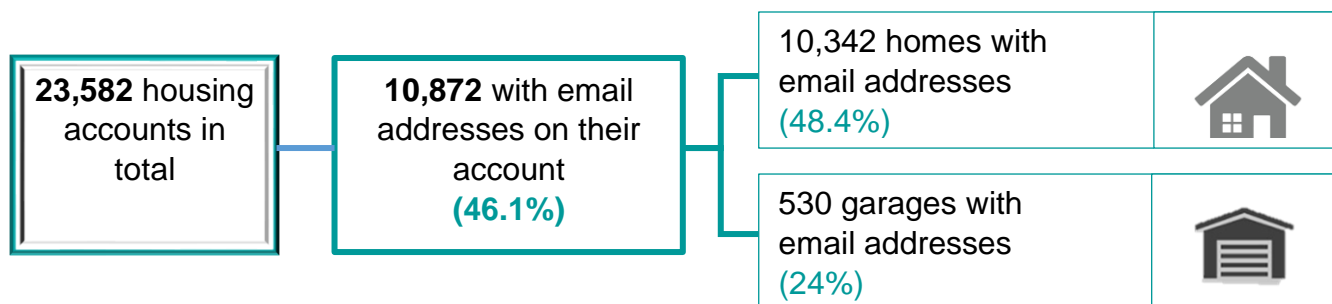
- ✓ The messages are clear
- ✓ There is no jargon, and
- ✓ All abbreviations and acronyms are explained.

#### Cost of production/ use of E-newsletters

The cost of producing Home Matters has not been reviewed in recent years and tenants have not been asked previously whether they would prefer to receive the newsletter by email rather than a paper version.

Production of a monthly e-newsletter for all twenty-five wards of Rotherham is progressing well. The total number of subscribers for the whole area is 8,206 with some people signing up to more than one area. Percentages of households receiving the e-newsletters ranges from 2.1% in Rotherham East and Rotherham West to 6.2% in Wickersley North. See Appendix B for full breakdown of wards.

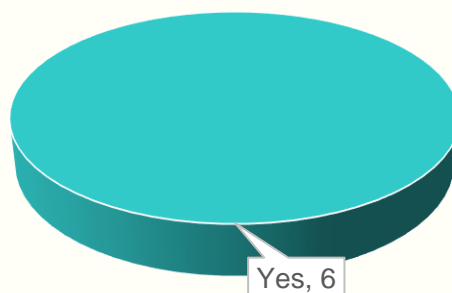
As part of the investigation, an exercise was carried out to find out how many households receiving newsletters and other publications have email addresses already set-up for their housing account. It was found that there are:



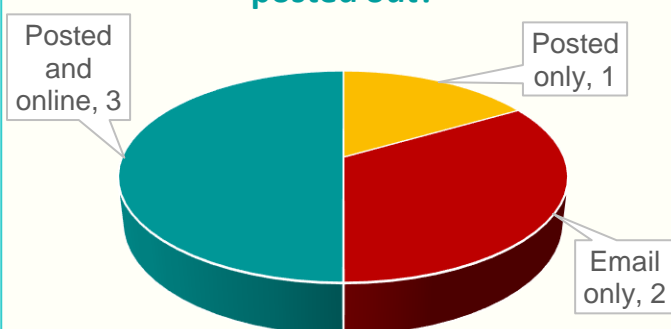
Comparison to other housing providers:

### Other Housing Providers

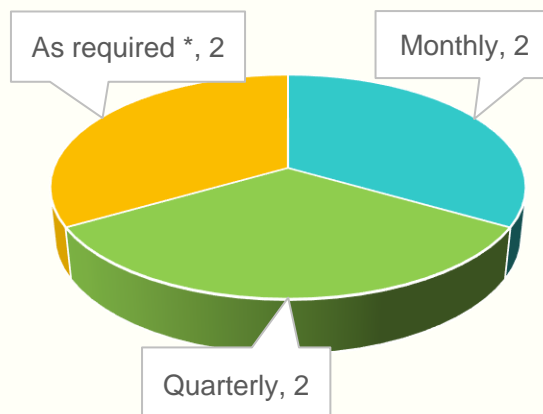
Do you have a specific newsletter for housing tenants?



E-newsletter or paper version posted out?



How often is it sent out?



\* Those responding 'as required' varied the frequency for different types and locations of tenancies e.g. sending more publications out to high-rise flats

The newsletter survey resulted in the following scores:

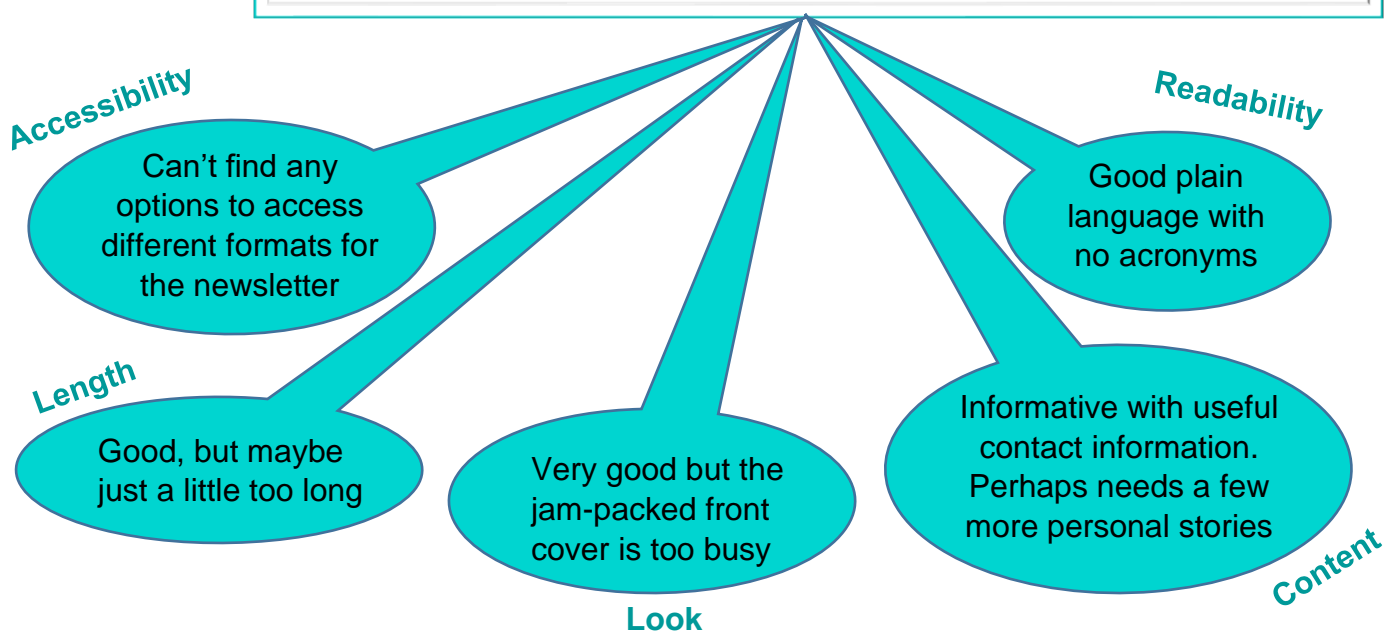
Housing Provider	Percentage scores					
	Accessibility	Readability	Content	Length	Look	Total
Hull	56	89	78 *	67	100 *	<b>78</b>
St Leger	78 *	67	78 *	78	89	<b>78</b>
Rotherham	17 -	92 *	83 *	92 *	83	<b>73</b>
Nottingham	25	58	71	50	92	<b>59</b>
Sheffield	17	58	67	83	25 -	<b>50</b>
Leeds	33	67	42	50	33 -	<b>45</b>

#### Highlights

- E-newsletters were not popular, scoring lowest of all (Sheffield and Leeds)
- Only the St Leger newsletter was good for accessibility
- Rotherham, St Leger, and Hull were best for content; those scoring low on content did not include any tenant stories
- The best-looking newsletter by far was Hull's

#### ROTHERHAM HOME MATTERS Score 73%








- Very poor for *accessibility*
- Very good for *content* and *length*
- Better by far than the others for *readability*, apart from Hull
- People liked the *look* apart from the jam-packed front cover



A full breakdown of responses from other housing providers can be found in Appendix C.

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## PANEL VIEWS:

-  The panel was keen to resurrect the arrangement of tenant representatives being involved in production of the Home Matters newsletter.
  -  It was encouraging that Rotherham residents were signing up to the ward e-newsletters. Despite numbers being low currently, it is hoped that these will grow in popularity over time.
  -  Some panel members reported that e-newsletters were not always compatible with the devices that they had. This was reflected in the low scores for the e-newsletters in other areas in the newsletter survey.
  -  However, the panel felt that providing an option of an e-newsletter for Home Matters would be useful, cost-saving and had the potential for more up-to-date information being circulated. This was particularly reaffirmed by email addresses being available for almost half of all tenants.
  -  Panel members were pleased that Home Matters scored so highly compared to the newsletters circulated by other housing providers.
  -  The St Leger and Hull newsletters scored highest for accessibility, both offering large print, audio and braille. Hull also offered their newsletter in different languages.
  -  It was felt that the issues of accessibility and look could be easily rectified to make Home Matters even better when compared to others.
- 

### Recommendations

#### Newsletter

- Improve the accessibility of the newsletter for all customers by offering the newsletter in other formats e.g. easy read, other languages
- Improve the publicity and access to the ward e-newsletters
- Conduct a consultation exercise to find out if tenants still like to receive their newsletter by post or if they would prefer it by email. Possibly design a hybrid model to meet all customer needs.

### Suggestions

**Tenant editorial board** – consider resurrecting the Home Matters editorial board and looking to increase publication of tenants' voice/stories.

**Home Matters look** – consider making the front page less cluttered.

## 5.7 Presentations



### Questions to Officers

#### Presentations

- *Do you have any arrangements in place to be able to sense-check any information/presentations before delivering to tenants? If so, please could you describe these?*

Officers reported that for all presentations there should be a 'dummy run-through' and preparation of a list of questions that were likely to be asked. It is important that every opportunity is given for customers to ask questions.

The Tenant Engagement team have been following these principles for a while and ensure that all presentations are easy to read and understand with no jargon. All materials to be used are checked against feedback from Rotherham Federation and tenants prior to all Housing Involvement panel meetings.

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#### PANEL VIEWS:



The panel was happy with the approach of checking all presentations to make sure that they are jargon-free, clear, easy to understand, and offer an opportunity for questions.

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## 5.8 Tenant Representation



### Questions to Officers

#### Formal Meetings

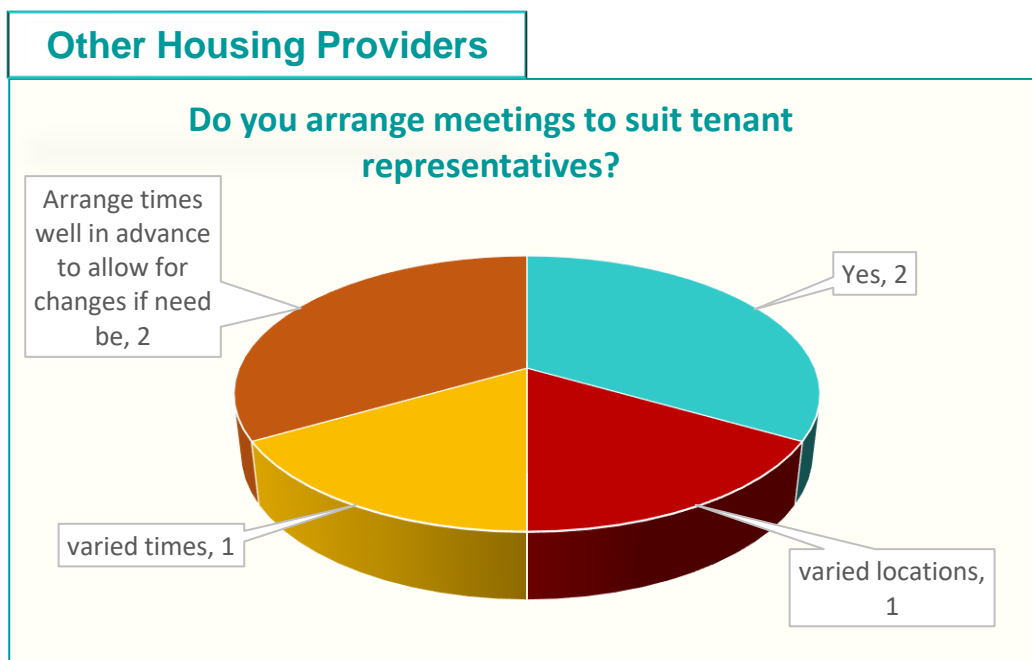
- *Do officers consider the convenience of time and place of meetings when inviting tenant representatives?*



Officers reported that this is important for all services and teams, when meeting with tenant representatives.

During the peak of the Covid pandemic, virtual open days were used to communicate with as many tenants as possible and these were recorded so that people could watch them in their own time if the live feed was inconvenient.

However panel members reported that there are still some meetings that are run on a weekday, 9am – 5pm, which would not suit working tenants.



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#### PANEL VIEWS:

- Panel members were happy with the range of meetings that tenant representatives and Rotherham Federation were invited to contribute to.
  - The panel felt that it was important to arrange meetings for tenant representatives at times and places that were more convenient i.e. outside office hours, or to vary arrangements to allow for more representatives to attend
-

## 5.9 Innovative communications



### Questions to Officers

#### Sharing innovative practice

- *How is innovative practice in communications and engagement shared across housing teams?*

It was not clear how innovative practices are shared across Council teams, but there are some fresh innovative ideas being used e.g. the garden competition was run digitally during the Covid pandemic, with photographs of gardens being judged.

Ideas from other housing providers were:

#### Other Housing Providers

Most housing providers had some new ideas; examples are:

- 'It's OK to complain' campaign (Berneslai)
- Online and telephone surveys to support consultation (Sheffield)
- STAR survey newsletter (Kirklees)
- Use of televisions for Council news in high-rise blocks/ Electronic noticeboards in Independent Living Schemes (Greatwell)
- Proud Tenant campaign (Berneslai)
- 'More than just a landlord' campaign (Berneslai)
- In our community' magazine – written by tenants for tenants (St Leger)

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### PANEL VIEWS:



The panel particularly liked the idea of having an 'It's OK to complain' campaign and also the use of more online and telephone surveys to consult better with residents.

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#### Recommendation

##### **Complaints and Compliments**

Consider running an 'It's OK to complain' campaign to encourage more feedback from tenants.

#### Suggestion

**Surveys** – consider the use of more online and telephone surveys to consult and communicate with tenants.



6. Recommendations		
Recommendations (in order of priority):		
Priority ranking	Recommendation	Page Number
<b>A</b>	<b>Letters</b> Continue to work through Council letters to make sure that they are understandable and written in plain language for all residents. Have a mechanism in place to review the letter templates with customers.	25
<b>B</b>	<b>Strategy</b> Provide an over-arching strategy on how the Council communicates with people living in Rotherham. Inform tenants how Council officers will communicate/ consult with them.	11
<b>C</b>	<b>Complaints and Compliments</b> Provide a link tile on the web page to allow people to find information on how to make a complaint/ comment or pay a compliment. Include reassurance on the linked page that it is useful to receive feedback and that there will not be repercussions from making a complaint.	23
<b>D</b>	<b>Website</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Consider the accessibility of the website by having links at the top of the home page to allow people to adjust the settings to their needs (perhaps similar to Berneslai and Wolverhampton).</li> <li>Check and change text on the website that uses acronyms or jargon</li> </ul>	23
<b>E</b>	<b>Newsletter accessibility</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Improve the accessibility of the newsletter for all customers by offering the newsletter in other formats e.g. easy read, other languages.</li> </ul>	29

<b>F</b>	<b>Telephone calls</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Review the new telephone system and make sure that the target of six minutes to speak to a real person is being met. Ensure that robust measurement is in place to monitor this target and respond to shortfalls going forward.</li> </ul>	17
<b>G</b>	<b>Complaints and Compliments</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Consider running an 'It's OK to complain' campaign to encourage more feedback from tenants.</li> </ul>	32
<b>H</b>	<b>Newsletter circulation</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Improve the publicity and access to the ward e-newsletters.</li> <li>Conduct a consultation exercise to find out if tenants still like to receive their newsletter by post or if they would prefer it by email. Possibly design a hybrid model to meet customer needs.</li> </ul>	29
<b>I</b>	<b>Staff training</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Work closely with Rotherham Federation representatives to develop training courses on communications/ customer care (This could include videos of tenant feedback/ tenant representative attendance/ listening to customer call recordings)</li> <li>Improve the handling of bereavement conversations by incorporating into training courses/ providing staff guidance.</li> </ul>	15
<b>Suggestions</b>		
1.	<b>Tenant Communications Working Group</b> – once the website development has commenced and customer advice/ testing is required, it may be useful to set up a temporary working group involving officers and tenant representatives.	
2.	<b>Tenant editorial board</b> – consider resurrecting the Home Matters editorial board and looking to increase publication of tenants' voice/stories.	
3.	<b>Home Matters look</b> – consider making the front page less cluttered.	
4.	<b>Surveys</b> – consider the use of more online and telephone surveys to consult and communicate with tenants.	

## 7. Appendices

- A** – Questions regarding communications for Council Tenants for other housing providers
- B** - Subscribers to Ward E-Newsletter
- C** - Full newsletter feedback from other housing providers

## **Questions regarding Communications for Council Tenants for other housing providers:**

### **Communications strategy**

1. Do you have a communications strategy that guides the way in which tenants/ residents are communicated with?

### **Letters**

2. How do you ensure that the letters you send are understandable for all recipients including people with specific accessibility needs and other vulnerable tenants?

### **Newsletter/ magazine**

3. Do you have a specific newsletter for housing tenants?
4. If so, is this available to be posted out to tenants or is it just available online?
5. How often are publications circulated to housing tenants?

### **Verbal communication**

6. Is there any training given to housing officers to ensure that they speak to tenants clearly and in a respectful manner? Please send details of the training if available, including frequency of re-training and range of colleagues attending the training.
7. Are the direct telephone numbers for officers given to tenants or do all calls come through a central point?
8. If a central point is used, what is the average and range of time taken for calls to be answered?
9. Do you have any arrangements in place to be able to sense-check any information/ presentations before delivering to tenants? If so, please could you describe these?

### **Tenant representation at formal meetings**

10. Do tenant representatives attend some of your formal Council/ Housing Association meetings?
11. If so, are meetings arranged at a time and place to suit tenant representatives?

### **General**

12. Do you have any examples of innovative practice as regards communications with housing tenants that you could share?
13. Are any of your publications/ letters checked by tenant representatives for plain language/ accessibility?

**PERCENTAGE OF PEOPLE AGED 16+ RECEIVING WARD NEWSLETTER****TOTAL OF 8206 SUBSCRIBERS = 3.84% OF ROTHERHAM POPULATION**

<b>WARD</b>	<b>NUMBER RECEIVING</b>	<b>WARD POPULATION (age 16+)</b>	<b>PERCENTAGE OF POPULATION</b>
Anston And Woodsetts	324	9208	3.5
Aston and Todwick	286	7633	3.8
Aughton and Swallownest	269	5122	5.3
Boston Castle	483	13433	3.6
Bramley and Ravenfield	383	7908	4.8
Brinsworth	283	7158	4.0
Dalton and Thrybergh	303	6968	4.4
Dinnington	358	10687	3.4
Greasbrough	266	6772	3.9
Hellaby and Maltby West	393	6965	5.6
Hoober	300	10170	3
Keppel	358	11388	3.1
Kilnhurst and Swinton East	297	5975	5
Maltby East	276	7357	3.8
Rawmarsh East	317	6996	4.5
Rawmarsh West	317	7753	4.1
Rother Vale	303	7206	4.2
Rotherham East	272	13015	2.1
Rotherham West	248	11930	2.1
Sitwell	358	10879	3.3
Swinton Rockingham	303	6888	4.4
Thurcroft and Wickersley South	428	8428	5.1
Wales	248	7913	3.1
Wath	317	7887	4
Wickersley North	503	8179	6.2
Other	13		
Total	8206		

## Full newsletter feedback from other housing providers


Tenant Scrutiny Investigation 6  
Could Rotherham Council improve its communication with tenants?

**LEEDS**

- Stopped mailing out newsletter in 2014 due to cost, environmental reasons and the wish to move to more digital communication for residents.
- Share key messages in rent statements four times a year e.g. Covid updates
- Send a **monthly email** using Gov Delivery, to approximately 33.5k tenants (approx. 65% of our tenants who have shared an email address). Delivery rate approx. 95% and an open rate of between 40-45%.
- Also main Facebook account, local Tenant Engagement Officer Facebook pages, and Twitter account.

Lowest score of all newsletters – 45%

- Poor for accessibility
- Some housing jargon used but readable otherwise
- 2 people thought it was too short
- Boring with no stories
- Looks too business-like



2

Tenant Scrutiny Investigation 6  
Could Rotherham Council improve its communication with tenants?

**NOTTINGHAM**


- Newsletter posted out quarterly and also available online (NCH news)
- Also post to social media and update website daily

Scored 59%

Main issues:

- A lot of acronyms
- Too much information crammed in
- The front cover and look were really good (top scorer for look)

But best score for content



Tenant Scrutiny Investigation 6  
Could Rotherham Council improve its communication with tenants?

**NEWSLETTER SURVEY HEADLINES**

Including:

- Survey feedback from four digital champions/ panel members, and
- Responses from other areas,

**Questions to other areas included:**

- ✓ If they had a specific newsletter for housing tenants
- ✓ If this is posted out or just available online
- ✓ How often are publications circulated

**Survey included:**

- Accessibility
- Readability
- Content
- Length, and
- Look



1


Tenant Scrutiny Investigation 6  
Could Rotherham Council improve its communication with tenants?

**HULL**

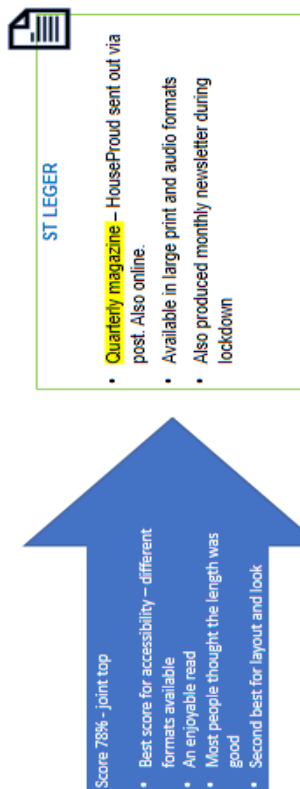
- Hull Housing Newsheet posted out to all tenants and also available online quarterly

Score 78% – joint top

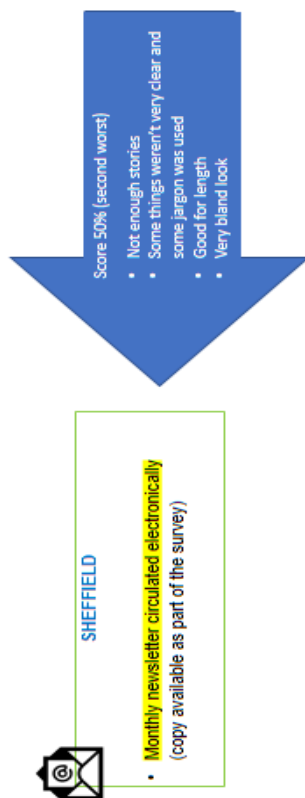
- A nice read – lots of topics and easy to follow
- A nice look – scored top points for this



Tenant Scrutiny Investigation 6  
Could Rotherham Council improve its communication with tenants?

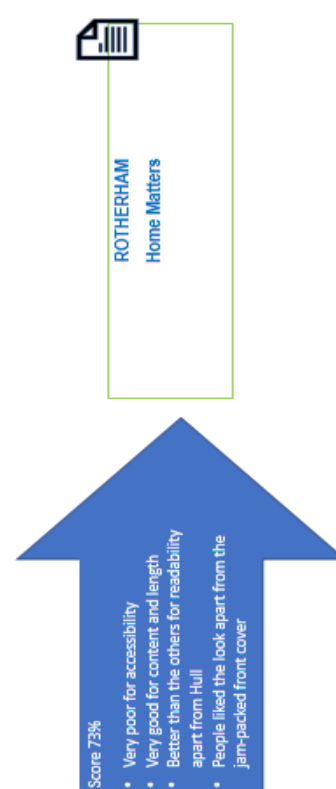


Tenant Scrutiny Investigation 6  
Could Rotherham Council improve its communication with tenants?

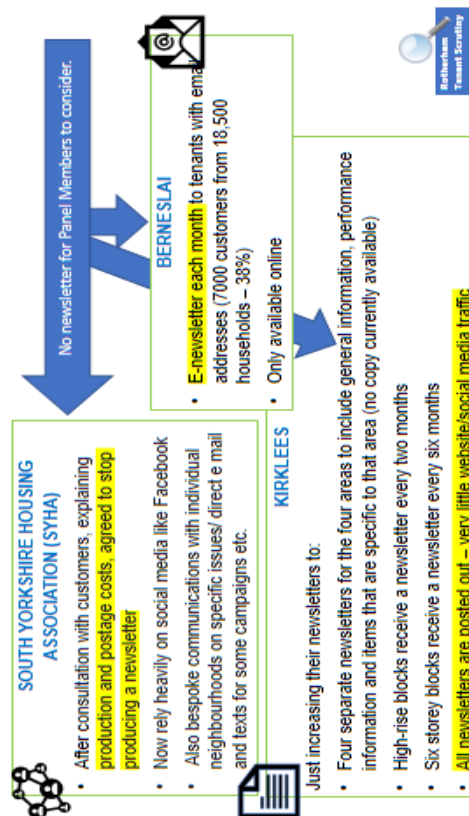


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Tenant Scrutiny Investigation 6  
Could Rotherham Council improve its communication with tenants?

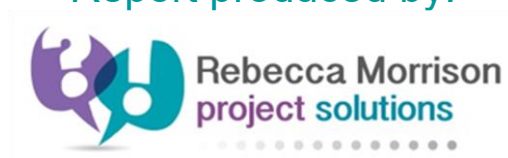


Tenant Scrutiny Investigation 6  
Could Rotherham Council improve its communication with tenants?



6

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On behalf of:



**Rotherham Federation**