

Committee Name and Date of Committee Meeting

Improving Places Select Commission – 21 March 2023

Report Title

Tenants Scrutiny Panel action plan update - Improving Communication with Tenants

Is this a Key Decision and has it been included on the Forward Plan?

No

Strategic Director Approving Submission of the Report

Ian Spicer, Strategic Director of Adult Care, Housing and Public Health

Report Author(s)

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Ward(s) Affected

Borough-Wide

Report Summary

The Tenant Scrutiny Panel is a key component of the Council's Tenant Engagement Framework, enabling tenants to scrutinise landlord services and standards with the aim of improving performance, value for money and tenant satisfaction.

The Panel is facilitated by Rotherfed on behalf of the Council and consists of tenant and resident representatives from across the Borough.

The Panel has completed a review of how the Council communicates with tenants, with reference to the requirements within the Social Housing White Paper. The report detailing the Panel's findings is attached as Appendix 1.

Following completion of the Tenant Scrutiny Review, the report and recommendations were discussed with the Housing Service and other relevant council services and an action plan agreed to support delivery of the recommendations.

This report provides the Improving Places Select Commission with a summary of the findings of the review and the associated action plan.

Recommendations

1. That Improving Places Select Commission note the outcome of the Tenant Scrutiny Review, the actions proposed to deal with each recommendation and progress to date.
2. That a further report detailing progress is presented to Improving Places Select Commission in 12 months time.

List of Appendices Included

- **Appendix 1** Tenants Scrutiny Panel Review - Investigation into how Rotherham Council could improve its communications with tenants.
- **Appendix 2** Tenants Scrutiny Review Action Plan.
- **Appendix 3** Initial Equality Screening (Part A).
- **Appendix 4** Equality Analysis Form (Part B).
- **Appendix 5** Carbon Impact Assessment.

Background Papers

None.

Consideration by any other Council Committee, Scrutiny or Advisory Panel

None.

Council Approval Required

No

Exempt from the Press and Public

No

1. Background

- 1.1 Since its inception in 2016, the Tenant Scrutiny Panel has undertaken several tenant scrutiny reviews of various aspects of the Council's Housing Services. The reviews have subsequently been reported to the Improving Places Select Commission.
- 1.2 Tenant Scrutiny Panel reviews have provided an ongoing opportunity for customers to work pro-actively with the Council, to look at various aspects of landlord service delivery, from a customer perspective and to develop recommendations and actions for service improvement.
- 1.3 The Panel has most recently completed a review of how the Council communicates with tenants, with particular reference to the requirements within the Social Housing White Paper. The Social Housing White Paper published in 2020 sets out the actions the Government will take to ensure that residents in social housing are safe, are listened to, live in good quality homes, and have access to redress when things go wrong.
- 1.4 In undertaking the review, the Panel focussed particularly on the following Chapters within the White Paper:
 - 1.4.1 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.
 - 1.4.2 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.
- 1.5 The Panel have undertaken a review of various methods of communication used across the Housing Service except for:
 - Social media, as some Panel members had limited experience.
 - Leaflets, as they were too wide-ranging for the investigation.
- 1.6 The review included:
 - A survey where individual Panel members scored each method of communication.
 - A survey of other housing providers; providers were asked for any learning points from their own communications approaches and if there were any examples of innovative practice.

- Interviews with Council officers representing Housing, Customer Services, Learning and Development, and Communications and Marketing.
- A 'Website Challenge' to assess the content of the Council website against six other housing providers.
- A review of the newsletters used by six other housing providers to assess against the Council's Home Matters magazine.
- Panel meetings to discuss the information and to agree the recommendations.

2. Key Issues

2.1 The Panel identified the following strengths with the current approach to communications.

2.1.1 A training matrix has been developed with a training passport for each job role and employee. This includes a training module on communication.

2.1.2 Improvements to the telephony system including a new menu of options to direct calls to the correct service and the introduction of a call back system.

2.1.3 Digital inclusion survey undertaken to understand barriers to accessing information online.

2.1.4 Standards are being drafted for all Council services on principles to follow for writing letters.

2.1.5 Use of Ward e-newsletters.

2.2 The Panel developed nine recommendations and four suggestions to improve communications as listed below and detailed in the report attached as Appendix 1.

2.3 Recommendations

2.3.1 Letters- review letters to make sure that they are understandable and written in plain language for all residents. Have a mechanism in place to review letter templates with customers.

2.3.2 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.

2.3.3 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.

- 2.3.4 Website - 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. Check and change text on the website that uses acronyms or jargon
- 2.3.5 Newsletter accessibility- Improve the accessibility of the newsletter for all customers by offering the newsletter in other formats e.g. easy read, other languages
- 2.3.6 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 measurement is in place to monitor this target and respond to shortfalls going forward
- 2.3.7 Complaints and Compliments- Consider running an 'It's OK to complain' campaign to encourage more feedback from tenants.
- 2.3.8 Newsletter circulation- 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 customer needs.
- 2.3.9 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
- 2.4 Further Suggestions:
 - 2.4.1 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.
 - 2.4.2 Tenant editorial board – consider resurrecting the Home Matters editorial board and looking to increase publication of tenants' voice/stories.
 - 2.4.3 Home Matters look – consider making the front page less cluttered
 - 2.4.4 Surveys – consider the use of more online and telephone surveys to consult and communicate with tenants.
- 2.5 Most of the recommendations developed are not housing specific and require the involvement of other services within the Council. A series of meetings have taken place with relevant services to discuss the recommendations and develop the actions within the plan.

2.6 The Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities has recently published a consultation 'implementing the new consumer regulatory regime: directions to the Social Housing Regulator on mutual exchange and tenant involvement' which proposes a strengthened requirement for Registered Providers of social housing to offer tenants a wide range of opportunities to get involved, ensure that tenants' views are considered when making decisions relating to their housing management and places a greater emphasis on transparency. The work of the Tenant Scrutiny Panel and the recommendations and actions detailed within this report, will continue to ensure that the Council meets regulatory requirements.

3. Options considered and recommended proposal

3.1 The Tenant Scrutiny Panel have developed nine recommendations and four suggestions. The response to each of the recommendations is detailed in the action plan attached as Appendix 2. The plan also provides an update on progress to date.

4. Consultation on proposal

4.1 The Tenants Scrutiny Review has been discussed at the Housing Involvement Panel.

4.2 The action plan, associated with this report (see Appendix 2), will be monitored at monthly Tenant Scrutiny Panel meetings, which are attended by Council officers, Rotherfed and tenant representatives.

5. Timetable and Accountability for Implementing this Decision

5.1 The Council's Housing Service along with the nominated lead officers in the action plan have responsibility for implementing the findings of the review and delivering the associated action plan within the designated timescales.

5.2 The Tenant Scrutiny Panel will receive regular updates on progress against the recommendations and actions.

5.3 A further report will be presented to the Improving Places Select Commission in 12 months' time, detailing progress on delivering the action plan.

6. Financial and Procurement Advice and Implications

6.1 There are no direct financial implications as the Action Plan will be delivered within existing resources and budgets.

- 6.2 There are no direct procurement implications arising from the recommendations detailed in the report. However, any identified need to procure goods, services or works in relation to delivering any of the actions will be procured in line with the Council's own Financial and Procurement Procedure Rules and the Public Contracts Regulations 2015 (as amended) as well as ensuring social value commitments are secured.

7. Legal Advice and Implications

- 7.1 There are no substantive legal issues arising from the content of this report.
- 7.2 The Scrutiny Review will support the Council in meeting statutory and regulatory requirements arising from the current Regulatory Tenant Involvement and Empowerment Standard and Social Housing Regulator customer standards.

8. Human Resources Advice and Implications

- 8.1 There are no human resource implications arising from this report.

9. Implications for Children and Young People and Vulnerable Adults

- 9.1 Improved accessibility for services will positively benefit engagement with children, young people and vulnerable adults.

10. Equalities and Human Rights Advice and Implications

- 10.1 Please see attached Equality Analysis.
- 10.2 We will actively engage under-represented groups and use our customer data to ensure services and communications are accessible and meet the diverse needs of our tenants and neighbourhoods by contributing to the Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion Strategy 2022-25 through the following:
- 10.2.1 Understanding, listening, and engaging across all communities.
- 10.2.2 Delivering fair, inclusive, and accessible services.
- 10.2.3 Empowering people to engage and challenge discrimination and to promote good community relations.

11. Implications for CO₂ Emissions and Climate Change

- 11.1 Please see attached Carbon Impact Assessment Report.
- 11.2 Through the Tenant Engagement Framework, we will contribute towards reducing carbon footprint and emissions through a flexible menu of options including hybrid working and accessing services online and being able to self-serve. This will help reduce the need for transport and waste.

12. Implications for Partners

- 12.1 The Council has a contract in place with Rother Fed (local Tenant Federation provider) to support the delivery of the work undertaken by the Tenant Scrutiny Panel, as part of the Council's Tenant Engagement Framework.
- 12.2 The Council will continue to seek out best practice and consider how to continually improve scrutiny and engagement with tenants through its Exemplar Accreditation and membership of national tenant participation advisory service, TPAS.

13. Risks and Mitigation

- 13.1 The key risk is the failure to engage with the Tenant Scrutiny Panel and inability to deliver against the recommendations in the action plan. This will be addressed through monitoring and reviewing progress detailed within the Action Plan. This will be further mitigated through ongoing monitoring and review by the Tenant Scrutiny Panel and Improving Places Select Commission.

Accountable Officer(s)

James Clark, Assistant Director of Housing
Paul Walsh, Head of Housing Operational Services
Lynsey Skidmore, Housing Operations Manager

Approvals obtained on behalf of:

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