

HOMES & COMMUNITIES COMMITTEE

15 MARCH 2021

CUSTOMER JOURNEY – TENANT ENGAGEMENT REVIEW UPDATE

1.0 Purpose of Report

- 1.1 To update members on the outcomes of Phase 1 of the review into tenant engagement and involvement agreed at Committee on 16th March 2020.
- 1.2 To support a number of proposals to move our tenant engagement arrangements forward, utilising efficiency savings.

2.0 Background Information

- 2.1 Members will recall at the March 2020 meeting of this committee that the proposed three phase approach to undertake a review of involvement and engagement services was approved.
- 2.2. In November 2020, the Council recruited a Tenant Engagement Officer (TEO) to look at the review and commence the first phase which was to agree the purpose of tenant involvement and engagement, how it will be used to improve homes and services, inform the work of the Committee and enable tenants to hold the Council to account
- 2.3 Initial Findings – our starting point
- 2.4 The TEO has undertaken a thorough desk top review of policies and procedures and spoken at length with involved tenants and front line officers and managers. Most of the work examined is based on arrangements transferred from the Newark and Sherwood Homes.
- 2.5 In Newark and Sherwood, tenants have been involved with the housing service since 1921 when the first tenants association in the Country was formulated on Hawtonville in Newark. Tenants have been having a say in the district for more than 100 years.
- 2.6 Previously, three tenants were invited on to the Board at Newark and Sherwood Homes and played a key role in deciding the strategic path of the company. The tenants involved during the transition period have now migrated to the Housing Advisory Group which Members will be aware of is in place whilst the new framework for engagement is being created.
- 2.7 The present structure includes the following groups and is supported by ad-hoc, service specific feedback requests from individual services.
 - Performance Monitoring Group,
 - Service Improvement Group
 - Tenant Scrutiny Panel
 - The Tenant Forum.
- 2.8 Tenants are also involved in estate walkabouts and some Task and Finish Groups. Although on the surface, this seems a formidable set of groups, which does see tenants monitoring and scrutinising services, the move back to the Council has seen this structure lose

momentum and so needs a regular injection of time from Officers to keep up the enthusiasm and drive to see improvements come to fruition.

- 2.9 Involved Tenants and tenant members of the Housing Advisory Group have recently been incorporated into the Council's Complaints Process and offered their services as advocates to tenants who need someone to talk to when they are experiencing difficulties with the service.
- 2.10 Although the structure outlined in 2.7 can be seen to hold the Council to account, officers will support tenants to review the structure in light of the new White Paper, feedback from tenants on how they wish to be involved and consider new ways to make tenant engagement stronger, representative, focused, flexible to the tenants available time and more appropriate. This will feed into phase 2 of the review.
- 2.11 Independence comes in the form of the Tenant Forum, which is chaired by a tenant and involves tenants from across the other elements of involvement, such as the Performance Group etc. Currently they number 12. These members are not formally elected and do not directly represent the community although they are very dedicated and keen to make a difference to housing services.
- 2.12 Newark and Sherwood District Council had previously supported a number of tenants and residents associations, giving people in communities an opportunity to get involved independently at a local level. There is no information to suggest these groups had been developed during the time of the ALMO and only one group has been found still in operation, based in Ollerton and Boughton.
- 2.13 The service also relies on feedback from tenants and leaseholders and there is a number of opportunities throughout the year where surveys and discussions with non-involved tenants do get fed into the system to inform policies and processes.
- 2.14 Publicity and website presence does not seem to show any obvious direction with regards to what is on offer, what tenants can be involved in and how their involvement makes a difference.

3. The purpose of tenant involvement and engagement

- 3.1 A new National Standards for Tenant Engagement have been produced by the Tenant Participation Advisory Service which recognises the importance of tenants' contributions to landlord services as does the Government's White Paper 'A Charter for Social Housing Residents'.
- 3.2 Tenant involvement and scrutiny can deliver better outcomes and can impact our tenants in different ways, covering a wide range of activities. Tenant engagement can be viewed as a continuum, from ensuring effective governance and delivery of core services to supporting individual and community empowerment. It is an investment and a pathway to cost savings and provision of better, more targeted and effective services to tenants and leaseholders based on their values and opinions.
- 3.3 As a housing provider it is essential that we give tenants and leaseholders the opportunity to influence the services they receive through appropriate representation as they experience the service on a day to day basis and they know how to put things right. This

could be at any level they wish to be involved at, whether it be to just feedback on something they have experienced or to let the Council know “what works well, even better if” often referred to as www.ebi.

- 3.4 Tenants have an interest in making sure their rent is being used properly and gaining the very best value from it. The current involved tenants see their role as:
- making a difference for the betterment of services for tenants and leaseholders and wider communities
 - Scrutineers of services (working in partnership with housing colleagues).
 - Influencing the Council through raising suggestions, concerns and ideas to consider for future service delivery

4. How can Tenant Engagement improve homes and services, inform the work of the Committee and hold the Council to account?

- 4.1 In addition to the existing structure, there is a real desire by tenants to help develop in the following areas:

- Developing contract specifications for investment works
- Driving up quality and reporting poor performance and work with officers when those levels drop below expected outcomes.
- Assessing the effectiveness of delivery from a tenant and leaseholder perspective.
- As sounding boards for new ideas or just to get the service user perspective
- Estate walkabouts with Members, Officers and Tenants as well as other agencies, to view their communities and work together to identify improvements.
- Developing existing work on void Inspections to monitor the impact of new standards.
- Working closely with this committee to benefit tenants and the wider community.

- 4.2 The Council are just awaiting feedback from consultation around the customer experience of various landlord services and how they wish to engage and influence going forward which will supplement the list above and influence the structure we will adopt in phase two of the review.

5. **Proposals following Phase 1 review**

5.1 The commitments requested of the Committee to ensure influence and accountability

- 5.2 For the Committee to commit to the following pledge:
- To seek, recognise, listen to and respect the voice of the tenant at the Committee level
 - To be held accountable where tenants feel this isn't the case
 - To invite regular updates on the work, views and feedback of tenants
 - Commission activities/work/reports at the request of tenants following scrutiny, mystery shopping, legislative changes and regulatory notices
 - Encourage regular feedback from tenants and show how this informs existing and new service delivery
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5.3 **Additional Tenant Engagement Officer - £37,622**

5.4 Going forward it is envisaged that the level of involvement will increase exponentially, both in individual involvement and representative groups and stretch across a larger section of the District reflecting the diverse demographic of households.

5.5 To facilitate this, the Council are looking for additional resources in the form of an additional TEO, to support the development work of the existing TEO and to engage more tenants and leaseholders. There is significant work to do to develop new and innovative opportunities for involvement including our digital offer to tenants.

5.6 **Training investment for existing involved tenants - £16,700**

5.7 We are in the process of conducting a training needs survey for tenants and it is clear that the digital 'barrier' makes it difficult for some to be engaged effectively. Building the capacity and upskilling our communities digitally will contribute to the Council's Community Plan through supporting the creation of vibrant and self-sufficient local communities where residents look out for each other and actively contribute to the local areas .

5.8 The committee is asked to support funding for a pilot project for involved tenants which will train them around digital and online use, and then they, will deliver this training to others in the community. The benefits to the community being:

- Feeling better connected to family, friends and their local community
- Improved mental health and wellbeing
- Greater understanding of what you can do online e.g. order prescriptions, book appointments
- Improved digital confidence & skills
- Better equipped to access information, advice and support that will support their health and well being
- Reduced loneliness and isolation – be able to for example access support groups
- Opportunities to build new friendships via for example on line forums
- Increased awareness of the 'online world'

5.9 Involved tenants will volunteer their time into this project and help deliver the programme, in exchange for the investment in their development. This will also benefit their engagement with the Council.

5.10 Newark Community and Voluntary Service (CVS) are keen to support this initiative, and will engage a Worker to work with tenants, often on a one to one basis, to fully capacitate them going forward. Each tenant will have a personalised plan including goals they want to achieve or aspire to. We will evaluate the current level of skills and confidence, reviewing at regular intervals as to measure progress against their plan.

5.11 At the end of the programme, we will assess the progress tenants have made in terms of skills and confidence levels and CVS will provide an evaluation report of the project. As a result we will also develop a support pack which can be rolled out to tenants as part of the training and online for those that want to try it themselves.

5.12 The pilot will require the Council to meet the wages and expenses of a CVS worker for six months including some equipment. We would also need 10 training tablets which can be

loaned to tenants who do not have access to appropriate hardware. These will be returned once the training is over and could be reused to start another round of training. The cost of this activity is £16,700.

5.13 Community Chest Fund - £20,000

5.14 Tenants are keen to try and reinvest some of the efficiency savings back into communities. Suggestions have been made about putting security gates in to Howe's Court in Newark, two benches to remember former tenant reps who had sadly passed, (sited in communal areas for tenants), repairing an alley way fence damaged along Ash Rd due to anti-social behaviour, provide new chairs for Cleveland Square Community Centre, flower boxes and beds at Magda Close, Lowdham. Ideas continue to come in.

5.15 It is proposed that we allocate £20,000 as a 'community chest' for these small community based ideas which will improve people's local space, especially when Covid is under control. If this idea is popular it may be that committee will be asked to consider providing a similar 'community chest' in subsequent years.

6.0 Digital Implications

6.1 Despite the transformative impact of technology on society, many people in the UK remain digitally excluded. This matters as those who are excluded digitally are also far more likely to be disadvantaged according to many other social and economic measures. The digital divide exacerbates inequality. Tenant engagement initiatives aims to tackle this inequality by upskilling tenants and consulting with those tenants on how the Council can shape its digital services to its customer needs.

6.2 Upon signing the Local Digital Declaration a commitment was made for a community focused project that works towards digital inclusivity. Tenant engagement working with partners Newark CVS is a project that achieves this commitment.

7.0 Financial Implications – FIN20-21/4691

7.1 The Housing Revenue Account (HRA) has a small annual budget of £5,000 for Tenant Involvement, which for the last two years as hardly been used. The initiatives outlined in this report have a threefold financial impact on NSDC, totalling 74,322, along with future years costs to be financed.

7.2 Firstly, the cost of an additional Tenant Engagement Officer on NS10 (including on-costs) of £37,622 is to be funded from the HRA Efficiency Reserve. This was created in the current financial year from budget savings identified in bringing the service back in-house. This reserve currently totals £691,000, and was created to finance further improvements to service provision, with approval from the H & C Committee. Future years' costs will also come from the Efficiency Reserve, or be incorporated into the base budget.

7.3 Secondly, the £16,700 identified in paragraph 5.7 for the CVS digital worker and purchase of tablets, will also be funded from the Efficiency Reserve, but will be a one off cost.

7.4 Thirdly, the initiative around a 'Community Chest' for tenant led ideas and improvements, can be funded from underspends identified in the HRA in the current year. The £20,000

proposed base will go into a Tenant Initiative Reserve, to be accessed and utilised to fund such suggestions as those mentioned in paragraph 5.10.

8.0 Community Plan – Alignment to Objectives

8.1 These proposals link to supporting the creation of vibrant and self-sufficient local communities where residents look out for each other and actively contribute to the local areas and contribute to % of residents attending a digital skills course who now feel more confident in using our services online.

9.0 Comments of Director(s) or Housing Advisory Group

9.1 Comments from the Housing Advisory Group on 18th February 2021 commented that tenants were concerned about budgets and value for money. The group support the need to invest in tenant participation and engagement to build a wider, inclusive and modern engagement model. Increasing resources in this area will enable the existing Tenant Engagement Officer to achieve the outcomes required from this review – including implementing in a timely manner and linking into building community spirit and truly engaged communities.

9.2 The group also recognise that to bring the Council up to the standard of what the Government White Paper demands is also challenging. The group feel that tenant involvement at NSDC is far behind other local housing providers in what they offer, through a lack of investment for a number of years, the demands of the White Paper shows this has to change and they welcome these proposals as first steps.

10.0 RECOMMENDATION(S)

Members note the contents of the report and that:

- 1. Members support the pledge set out in 5.2 around tenant influence**
- 2. Members approve proposal set out in 5.3 – 5.15 for**
 - a. the recruitment of an additional Tenant Engagement Officer;**
 - b. the pilot of “Let’s Connect” digital project and;**
 - c. a community chest budget of £20,000 for community based & tenant led improvements.**
- 3. Members to note that further feedback will come to this Committee on the customer journey findings as they are available.**

Reason for Recommendation(s)

The additional role supports the commitment of the District Council to tenant engagement and involvement and strengthens compliance with the Regulator of Social Housing - Tenant Engagement and Empowerment Standard

The support of the ‘Lets Connect Pilot’ supports the Community Plan in engaging with tenants to make them more aware of opportunities for digital use and in particular provides enhanced communication techniques when using council services

Background Papers

For further information please contact Terry Bailey, Tenant Engagement Officer on Ext 5833

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