

Sheffield City Council

Support for Engagement Review

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Introduction

TPAS was commissioned in November 2019 to support Sheffield City Council (SCC) with its project to review current tenant engagement arrangements. SCC has created a Task and Finish Group, consisting of staff, tenants, a leaseholder and an elected councillor to oversee the project.

SCC advised Tpas that their review is not a cost saving exercise; rather it is a process to help to improve the outcomes and impacts that tenant engagement structure delivers. SCC also advised that it has a series of engagement activities in place but no functioning engagement strategy; and that to a large degree there is an acceptance that some structures are not representative and in many cases not delivering robust impact.

Tpas project scope

Tpas undertook a piece of qualitative evidence gathering with tenants, leaseholders and staff about their experience of tenant engagement. Tpas used a technique known as Appreciative Inquiry as the research method for this project. The key feature of Appreciative Inquiry is that it uses the existing successes, strengths and achievements as the foundation for developing a vision of the future. This is known as 'the positive core'. Appreciative Inquiry enables people to identify the work that they are proud of; the work that motivates them; and the work that gets good results. Tpas uses Appreciative Inquiry as a research starting point because it begins its focus on '*what's strong not what's wrong*'

The methods used to undertake the review were

- Focus groups with different tenants and residents involved in different engagement mechanisms including Tenants and Residents Associations (TARAs).
- Focus group discussions with Sheffield City Council housing staff.

The focus groups, which took place on 2nd and 3rd December 2019, were all structured around the following questions

- How does tenant involvement impact your role?
- What is good about the current tenant involvement structure and methods
- What needs to change?
- What has changed at Sheffield City Council Housing as a result of tenant involvement?

The 39 customers who attended the session were self-selecting. Some have been involved with the landlord for many years. The invitation process did, however, result in six customers attending who have never previously been involved. This piece of qualitative research should not be seen and read in isolation; rather it is another form of customer insight to be used alongside other methods to help SCC Housing to gain a better understanding of their customers' views.

Out of Scope

The funding, accountability and role of Tenants and Residents Associations (TARAs) was not considered as part of this project.



Executive Summary

This project was not a root and branch analysis of the involvement structure and methods. Instead this was a piece of qualitative research to attempt to identify the feelings of customers and staff about involvement.

Tpas heard that, for some tenants, their perception is that engagement is now less effective than it was in the past. Bearing in mind that the management of the housing stock was brought back 'in-house' in 2012; that regulation has changed measurably since 2012; and that the full impact of the Grenfell inquiry is still to be understood and implemented, it is no longer the case that the past was a better place. The issue facing Sheffield City Council Housing is *'what do you need to develop and change to ensure that involvement and empowerment is fit for the 2020's'*

The current model has 'strategic group' that links/works with elected members (elected members are the legal accountable body for the delivery of housing); this in turn links to local strategic groups; who in turn link to local customers and TARAs. The challenge facing SCC Housing is that, on paper, it has a model for engagement that should be effective; but because time is spent 'servicing' the model e.g. having meetings, producing minutes, there appears to be no measurable benefit to customers or landlord.

Tpas recommendations are as follows:

- Develop a Tenant and Leaseholder Engagement Strategy that reflects the vision and values of SCC Housing and which meets the minimum requirements of the consumer standards and compliance
- Develop digital methods of engagement to help you gain a better understanding of customers experience of landlord services and to widen the pool of involved customers
- Develop, with tenants and leaseholders, a clear set of service standards for all the key landlord services
- Review the role of Housing and Neighbourhoods Advisory Panel (HANAP) and consider ways of transforming this into an assurance committee/group
- Use targeted engagement activities, linked to the business plan and service area plans, to plan outcome focussed engagement activities.



An overview of the findings from the focus groups

Tenants and Residents Associations (TARAs)

There are 49 TARAs funded through a tenant levy. Some TARAs are also successful in gaining other funding streams to help deliver community based (non-social housing) projects e.g. helping people apply for jobs, providing welfare advice, providing specific age related group activities. Some TARAs are less active and it is not clear what measurable outcomes they are achieving for their community.

There was recognition, by tenants and staff, that it is getting more difficult to get local people involved in the TARAs. They identified that demographic and lifestyle changes means the younger people don't have time or an interest in being part of a TARA. In some cases the TARA is run by less than a handful of people and with no obvious succession planning some groups will inevitably close in the near future.

A minority of attendees at the focus groups described their feelings about the governance of the TARAs in negatives terms and expressed views that the governance was too stringent. It was clear also that this has led to fraught and difficult relationships between some staff and some TARA committees.

It should be noted that the TARA model of engagement for landlord services is no longer the common model seen across the housing and local authority sector. The influence of digital engagement and social media make it easier for more tenants/customers to be involved in an organisation and it must be recognised that the majority of people don't want to give up their spare time to attend meetings. TARAs thrive and survive when they are doing work in the community that goes beyond tenure and housing and the question all social landlords need to be asking is *'Should we be relying on TARAs to be our primary means of consultation with our customers about our key landlord services?'*

Housing Neighbourhood Partnership Groups (HNPGs) and Housing and Neighbourhoods Advisory Panel (HANAP)

Focus group delegates had a number of issues about the relationship and effectiveness of the HNPGs and HANAP. The specific points raised were

- Is HANAP just a tick box exercise and talking shop? The example given here was that actions from meetings are not being carried out by the council. There is a perception that nothing changes as result of HANAP.
- Where do the minutes from the Repairs APG go?
- How do HANAP reps feedback to area meetings?
- Is there consistency in reporting to HNPG meetings and then to HANAP?
- Numbers at HNPG meetings have reduced. Attendees felt this is because nothing really happens/changes as result of the meetings
- Numbers attending HANAP also reducing as areas are not sending along deputies when the area nominee is unable to attend.
- Do the HNPGs really understand the role and limits of HANAP i.e. it can recommend but not make decisions
- Actions from HANAP meetings are not followed up



Common themes from all the focus group sessions

The following is brief summary of the common themes expressed across all the sessions

Engagement

- There is less involvement now than when we part of Sheffield Homes
- Involvement and services generally were better when it was the ALMO because we had local decision making and accountability
- We have fewer meetings now. The example given is that HNPG used to meet monthly and now meets quarterly
- We listen to tenants/customers views but it is the same small group that we hear from
- Do councillors really understand what being a (social) landlord is really about? This view was expressed in relation to councillors not attending local meetings and that elected members are not attending HANAP.
- The invitation to attend one of the meetings was sent via email and the six previously non-involved customers all said that this email was a significant factor in encouraging them to attend. One commented that had the council sent a letter they probably wouldn't have opened it in time but as an email is 'immediate' it catches the reader's attention. The positive comment about the email invitation was also expressed by those currently involved with SCC Housing.

Service issues

- Repairs service is not good
- Phoning the council is a difficult process (*Tpas has read the recent scrutiny report by C4C highlighting the need for improvements in customer access)
- Mixed views on the effectiveness of the housing plus model. Some customers had high praise for the local staff noting that the staff are responsive and committed to their role. A much smaller number of focus group delegates were not convinced the Housing Plus model is working in their area.
- Tenants and leaseholders are not clear about the services standards they can expect from their landlord
- Communication with the council is not good

What ideas do you have for changes?

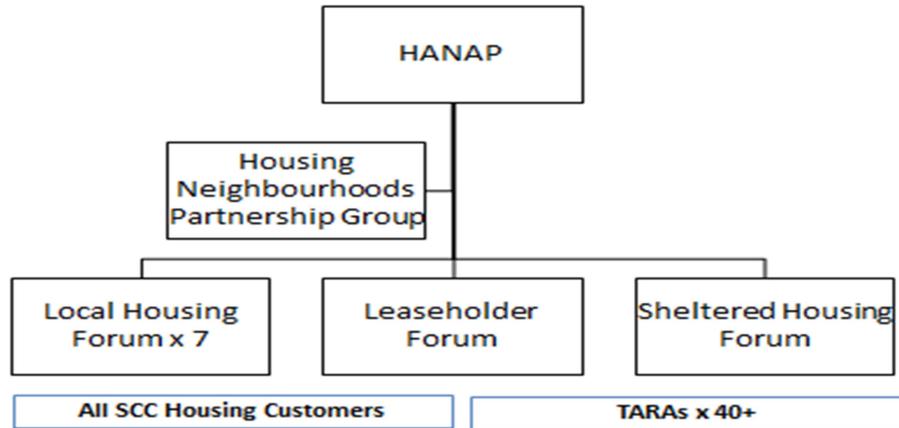
The following is brief summary of the common themes expressed across the sessions

- A Customer Charter
- More accountability in the relationship between the council as landlord and its customers (tenants and leaseholders)
- Policies and service standards that are known and published
- More digital and on-line involvement
- Could we better define community involvement and tenant involvement?



What does the current SCC Housing involvement and co-regulation model look like?

The diagram below is our interpretation and understanding of the current model:



On paper this meets the requirements of the Tenant Involvement and Empowerment Standard. However, when asked ***‘what has changed at SCC Housing as a result of tenant involvement’*** the answer, from all the focus group session was ***‘we don’t know’***

Tpas’ view is that a great deal of time and effort , from landlord and customers, is spent on servicing this model by holding meetings, producing minutes, meeting customers etc.

The question for Task and Finish Steering Group to consider as part of the review is ***‘What has changed in terms of service delivery improvements, customer satisfaction and value for money in service delivery as a result of engagement with customers through this model of co-regulation?’***

The response you should be looking for is the measurable changes and impacts that the model has produced. If these are not obvious then you have to consider how to ensure that engagement does lead to improvements and changes that benefit both the landlord and the customer.



Regulation of Social Housing - Context and Expectations

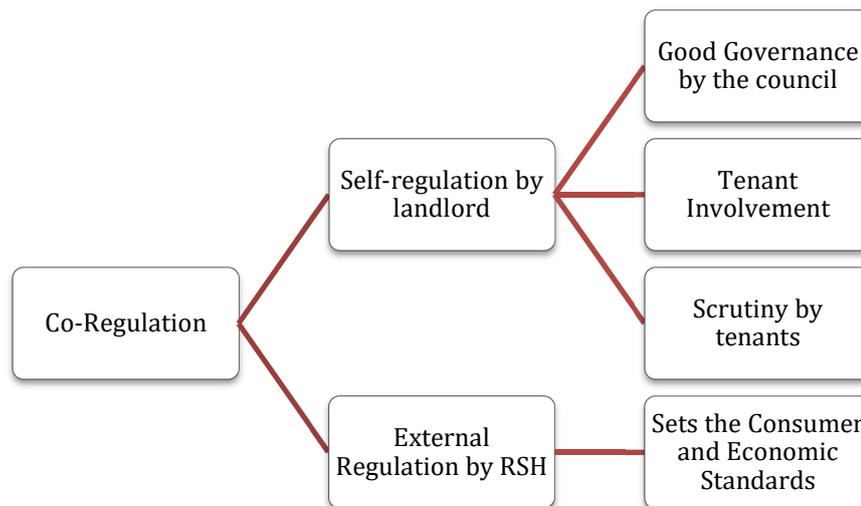
Sheffield City Council is required to meet the Regulatory Standards for Social Housing in England.

Specifically, it is required to meet the Consumer Standards (*Home Standard, Tenant Involvement and Empowerment Standard, Tenancy Standard and Neighbourhood and Community Standard*) and the expectations of co-regulation.

The objectives of consumer regulation as set out by the Regulator for Social Housing (RSH) are:

1. to support the provision of social housing that is well-managed and of appropriate quality
2. to ensure that actual or potential tenants of social housing have an appropriate degree of choice and protection
3. to ensure that tenants of social housing have the opportunity to be involved in its management and to hold their landlords to account
4. to encourage registered providers of social housing to contribute to the environmental, social and economic well-being of the areas in which the housing is situated

Co-Regulation Model: *The diagram below aims to illustrate the how the co-regulation model, prescribed by the RSH, operates*



RSH Consumer Regulation Review 2018-19 (published July 2019) gave the sector an overview of the thinking within RSH about regulation and the direction it is taking. We draw your attention to the following key messages, reproduced in full, from the review:

1. All registered providers have an obligation to act to ensure the homes where their tenants live are safe. Providers must meet the full range of statutory health and safety obligations.
2. This requires registered providers to have robust reporting and assurance arrangements in place for effective oversight of compliance by boards and councillors.
3. Effective assurance relies on good quality data, and maintaining compliance requires effective systems.



4. Registered providers should understand, and be able to demonstrate compliance, across all aspects of the consumer standards, including how they engage with their tenants, how they deal with neighbourhood issues, and how they allocate their properties.
5. Delivering compliance with the consumer standards depends on good governance, and on an organisation's culture.
6. The quality of relationship with tenants underpins registered providers' ability to meet their objectives. The effectiveness of registered providers' complaints handling affects the level of trust and confidence tenants have in their landlord.
7. Transparency with the Regulator is essential. Co-regulation requires registered providers to be transparent with the regulator, and a failure to do so can indicate broader governance concerns.

Tenant involvement, scrutiny and assurance – models and approaches

Tpas have always advocated that landlords and their customers must find a way of delivering involvement, scrutiny and governance that best suits their geography, customer demographic and property portfolio. The key drivers, from the landlord's perspective, for involvement will be regulatory requirements and legal and compliance issues – and it is likely that we will see a refocus on the compliance areas over the coming years. Landlords also need to appreciate the proven business case for effective involvement through increased satisfaction, better services and savings. The key driver for involvement from the tenants' perspective will be around their key priorities i.e. rents, rights and repairs.

Tenant Involvement

The Tpas National Engagement Survey 2019 found that there is a positive link between engagement and business strategies, but that there is room for improvement to ensure that this engagement feeds into the changing business and regulatory environment. In our survey, 88% of respondents stated that the purpose of engagement is to improve services provided by landlords; and 48% that it should help achieve transparency and accountability.

The survey also found that digital engagement methods are increasing and that they have the ability to widen the pool of engaged customers; but digital methods must be used alongside other methods such as pop-up events, task and finish approaches. The traditional group meetings and consultative panels still have their place but we are seeing less of this approach.

The survey also found that communicating the outcomes of involvement is usually done through the Annual Report to tenants. On this we would challenge organisations to consider what they are reporting and that the distinction between outputs and outcomes needs to be better understood by landlords.

Tpas feel that customer involvement is not a service but rather that it is a cultural attitude and works well when part of a whole team approach and ambition similar to the approach taken in respect of customer services. It means service teams planning the ways in which customer might and should be involved; and includes information, meaningful consultation, and assurance.

Tenant Scrutiny

Since its inception in 2007 the growth of the 'dedicated scrutiny group' approach now appears to be levelling and we are seeing landlords using task and finish approaches, boot camp events and hackathons to deliver a scrutiny project. The advantages of these approaches is that they enable a wider demographic



of customers to be involved in scrutiny projects without having to give the time commitment that has often been a symbol of the work of the traditional scrutiny group approach.

We are also noting that, when compared with the situation in 2007, landlords are better at collecting and analysing data about their services. The impact on scrutiny is that projects are often now selected in partnership with the landlord with many taking a collaborative approach to reviews.

Tenant Assurance

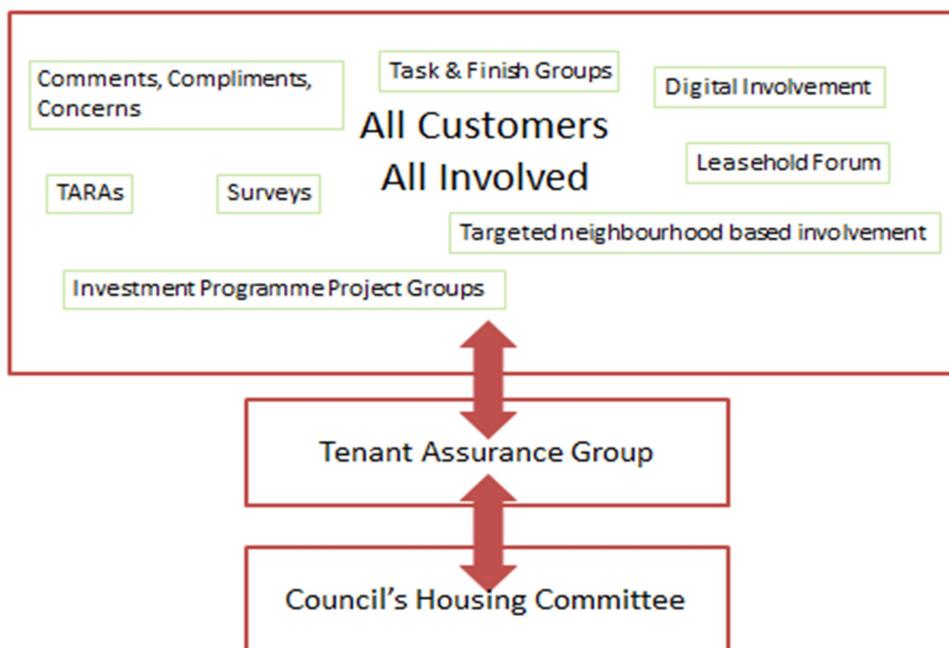
We are working with landlords to develop customer assurance groups. The models are based on a formally appointed committee, sometimes with delegated powers from a Board, who are providing the assurance to the board/councillors that the consumer standards are being met by the landlord. The group is not a consultative body rather it holds the executive to account by ensuring that wider tenant involvement is happening and that service standards are being met. We are developing these models to respond to the expectations of the regulatory standards, which states:

****“We regard board members and councillors as responsible for ensuring that providers’ businesses are managed effectively and that providers comply with all regulatory requirements.....Providers must support tenants to shape service delivery and to hold boards and councillors to account”***

*Source: Regulating the Standards – 2017

www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/638146/Regulating_the_Standards_July_2017.pdf

The tenant assurance model, we feel, addresses this very specific requirement of the regulatory standards and supports boards and councillors (as the legal accountable body for the landlord) in their role to ensure that social housing meets regulatory and compliance standards. This diagram aims to illustrate how the model might work:





Recommendations - What could SCC Housing do differently?

The challenge facing SCC Housing is that, on paper, it has a model for engagement that should be effective; but because time is spent 'servicing' the model e.g. having meetings, producing minutes, there appears to be no measurable benefit to customers or landlord.

The hierarchical models of engagement, have many advantages but are not as attractive to tenants as they used to be and, it can be argued, that such models are not representative of the wider customer body as they attract a limited demographic/type of tenant. The fact remains, however, that the landlord needs to have a full understanding of customer experience and needs.

The following are ideas and suggestions for you to consider:

Strategy

- Develop a Tenant and Leaseholder Engagement Strategy that reflects the vision and values of SCC Housing and which meets the minimum requirements of the consumer standards and compliance.

Governance and assurance

- Review the role of HANAP and consider ways of transforming this into an assurance committee/group
- Ensure you gather effective, accurate and timely customer insight to enable SCC Housing to understand the customer experience
- Reflect on the governance of TARAs to identify if the arrangements and processes are fit for purpose from the point of view of both SCC Housing and the TARA Committees.

Involvement

- Develop digital methods of engagement to help you gain a better understanding of customers experience of landlord services and to widen the pool of involved customers
- Develop, with tenants and leaseholders, a clear set of service standards for all the key landlord services
- Develop, with involved customers, a Housing Customer Charter. You might wish to consider the National Housing Federation's (NHF) Tenants Charter as starting point (this charter will be a required standard for governance for housing association – probably from April 2020)
- Use targeted engagement activities, linked to the business plan and service area plans, to plan outcome focussed engagement activities. This might mean using project based 'task and Finish' group activities or Pop-up engagement as and when needed. Being proactive when identifying how and when tenant involvement can be incorporated into service area action plans e.g. If you are about to carry out a planned maintenance programme create a steering group of tenants, on a task and finish group basis, to work with the repair teams to manage, communicate and oversee the project
- The use of local community champions to be the eyes and ears on the ground in areas where there isn't a TARA
- The development of an on-line consultation panel that is a virtual panel to respond to surveys; policy changes, service reviews etc.

Scrutiny

- Consider new ways of delivering scrutiny that places less reliance on the small number of scrutiny panel members and which will enable you and them to widen involvement in scrutiny.



Acknowledgements

Tpas would like to thank the tenants, residents and staff who took time to talk to us about their experiences; and to share their ideas on how formal and informal involvement could be changed and improved.