

MINUTES

HOUSING AND COMMUNITY OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

16 JULY 2014

Present:

Councillors:

Adshead	Hearn
Mrs Bassadone	N Hollinghurst
Clark	Mahmood (Vice-Chairman)
Conway	Marshall (Chairman)
Flint	

Co-opted Members:

Alan Horn

Officers:

Elliott Brooks	Assistant Director (Housing & Landlord)
Katie Kiely	Team Leader, Income Management
Jules Stevens	Lead Officer, Tenant Involvement
Michelle Anderson	Corporate Support Team Leader - Democracy

The meeting began at 7:30 pm

OS/162/14 MINUTES

The minutes of the Housing and Community OSC meeting held on 18 June 2014 were confirmed by the Members present and signed by the Chairman.

Matters Arising

Councillor Marshall noted that at the last meeting the committee enquired about how the Housing department recorded complaints. She asked Officers if it was correct that a new computerised system was being implemented.

E Brooks explained that currently, all complaints come through to Group Manager level and within that there were a number of Team Leaders looking after different areas. Group Managers had been asked as to what areas they would like their service split into in order for the complaint to be allocated accordingly on the computerised system. It was hoped that over the next few months, the complaints system would be enhanced.

Councillor Marshall sought confirmation that officers would update the system to include all complaints received over the past year.

E Brooks confirmed this and said that the committee would receive a report on this at its meeting in June 2015.

Councillor Mahmood asked if all complaints received a written response.

E Brooks confirmed that all complaints received written responses and that his service replied to 80% within the 15 day deadline.

Councillor Marshall noted that the committee had previously questioned the economics of screening OSCAR winning films at the Old Town Hall. It was reported that a response had been circulated explaining that it was financially beneficial to screen these types of films.

OS/163/14 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies were given for Councillors Adeleke, Killen, McLean, and R Sutton.

Councillor Clark substituted for Councillor McLean.

Alan Horn was substituting for Mavis Cook.

OS/164/14 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

OS/165/14 PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

There was no public participation.

OS/166/14 CONSIDERATION OF ANY MATTER REFERRED TO THE COMMITTEE IN RELATION TO CALL IN

None.

OS/167/14 RENT COLLECTION AND PERFORMANCE REPORT

K Kiely introduced the report and noted that the results for rent collected for 2013/14 were very good and above target at 101.41% collected. She said this was a very pleasing performance and one which the team had worked hard to achieve. She explained that the team had helped tenants make claims, helped them to maximise their income and trained the staff involved.

K Kiely explained all of the service enhancements which had been taking place.

The service had recently taken part in a joint project with CIH and a number of other Social Landlords – ‘Working Together to Create Sustainable Tenancies’. This provided, among other things, a forum for sharing ideas and best practice. The workshops proved very useful and participants were entitled to a number of consultancy days to deal with specific issues of their choosing.

The Financial Inclusion Project is currently focusing on developing training for tenants in arrears and enhancing the DBC website to provide pre-tenancy advice on financial management. The council is also running a series of Drop In Surgeries at various locations across the Borough to assist tenants with financial queries.

All income staff had received full training on the recent and upcoming changes to welfare benefits and further information and training is on-going as required.

Information to tenants on Welfare changes had been provided in Housing News and Views.

Financial advice and information on the reverse of statements was regularly reviewed and updated.

Planning of the next rent campaign is already underway and preliminary work is being done to ensure that this year’s Christmas campaign runs smoothly and efficiently. This Summer campaign will have the emblem of a bee and the slogan ‘Don’t bee too Buzzy to pay Your Rent’. The ‘Spring Clean Your Finances’ was a previously successful campaign as was the last Christmas campaign, for which another local authority had asked to use the department’s artwork.

The service is continuing to work on a number of projects with the Credit Union to provide access to basic bank accounts and to offer a 'jam-jar' (managed) account to tenants who were likely to need assistance with budgeting, as well as offering low cost loans for specific purposes and encouraging saving.

The service is working on a digital inclusion project designed to increase access to the internet amongst the tenants, as well as being important for the introduction of Universal Credit, which is designed to be digital by default. Wi-Fi has now been installed in all of the supported housing schemes, allowing residents to connect their computers, smartphones or other devices to the internet wirelessly for free in the communal lounges. Further support would be given as many forms would be able to be completed online in the future.

The Council is working with the CAB to provide priority access to advice for tenants. There are close working relationships with other organisations e.g. Druglink, Turning Point/Housing Link, to access support and advice services for all tenants. Work was being done to produce a Service Level Agreement and to put in place a referral process.

The team are engaging with the Court User Group to ensure that an improved service from the Courts was received and in order to receive advice/information about the approach Courts are likely to take in possession actions, arising from welfare changes, bedroom tax etc.

The Income Team Leader is a member of the Panel set up to review decisions on Discretionary Housing Payment to which tenants in financial difficulty are encouraged to apply.

The Income Team Leader is also a member of the Corporate Customer Focus Group which had been set up to improve ease of access to services.

The housing customer service portal was launched in mid-June. This gives tenants access to their rent account enabling them to make online payments, view their rent statement and order replacement payment cards. The Portal also allows them to report and check the progress of repairs and to update their contact details. This had been very well received so far.

The introduction of text messaging would allow automated texts to be sent to tenants in arrears as well as allowing tenants to text simple queries and receive automated responses.

Further improvements to the Housing Management IT system will improve targeting of interventions and ensure early action helping to prevent the build-up of arrears.

Keys points of discussion

Councillor Adshead congratulated the officers on the format of the report. He found it to be clear and easy to read and hoped that all reports could be like this in the future.

Councillor Mahmood referred to the chart showing rent collection rates and asked if the 101.41% collected, meant that all arrears were recovered.

K Kiely explained that they had collected 101.41% which was all rent due plus some arrears which had been carried over from the previous financial year. There was a mix of people in rent arrears, some were ongoing and some were people who found themselves in financial difficulty but soon overcome their problems.

Councillor Mahmood asked if there was a reward for those people who were up to date with their rent such as an annual prize draw.

E Brooks reported that this had previously been considered by the relevant Group Manager, however the Portfolio Holder did not want this explored any further.

Councillor Mrs Bassadone asked if the rent arrears included homeless people in temporary accommodation.

K Kiely said it did not include homeless people, just Dacorum tenants.

Councillor Mrs Bassadone noted that members had been informed of many changes within the Housing team and asked if a structure chart could be produced.

E Brooks said a chart could be produced showing all Team Leaders and their day to day functions and then a separate chart could show which officers look after certain areas of the borough. This would be circulated to members.

Councillor Marshall said that the recent audit report on housing rents was one of the best internal audit reports she had seen. Referring to the auditors' comment on retaining and locating rent refund request forms, she asked if this is now being done electronically.

K Kiely said they are in the process of scanning all documents and the introduction of E-Post would start next week.

Councillor Mahmood requested that when officers completed the summary sheet for their reports, that they note the date of the last report, which the current one supersedes in order to help members cross reference.

Councillor N Hollinghurst thanked officers for a very good and very interesting report, which clearly showed the progress being made. He noted the large jump in figures between March and April 2013, shown on the chart for rent collection rates and asked if there were any specific factors for this.

K Kiely said that this was due to Housing Benefits. Housing Benefits were behind in the previous financial year and then carried out lots of work to catch up, therefore this affected the figures.

Councillor N Hollinghurst said that the slowness of processing benefit claims was a concern, but understood the introduction of discretionary payments would help.

K Kiely said her team worked closely with the benefits team and tenants to help introduce payment plans. They would not normally proceed to court to evict a council tenant if they were waiting for their benefits claim to be processed. They were aware this could be an issue for non-council tenants.

Councillor Flint asked who was on the Corporate Customer Focus Group (CCFG) and what BSI were used for.

K Kiely explained that the CFFG was an internal working party set up to look at how customers interact with the council, for example the ease of the telephone and internet systems.

BSI audited the council's processes and procedures.

E Brooks added that the CFFG was a good news story. He said that the council had set up groups in the past and used a central team of people to carry out the work. Having since made a plea to the Chief Executive, the groups now involved the officers who had the relevant skills and hands-on knowledge, which worked better.

Outcome

The Housing and Community Overview and Scrutiny Committee noted the report and were impressed by the success of K Kiely's team.

OS/168/14 GET INVOLVED STRATEGY 2012-2015

J Stevens introduced the report and explained that in November 2013 an update report on the Get Involved Strategy 2012-15 was presented at this committee. This report updated the committee on the progress that had been made through year two of the strategy. Year two of the strategy had now been completed and the third and final year has commenced, with good progress being made in the first quarter of the year.

Following a review of the year two action plan with the Tenant Involvement Review Group (TIRG), objectives were finalised for year three of the strategy, which concentrates on low level tenant involvement activities and seeks to increase the number of tenants and leaseholders involved with the housing service at a local level.

The overall objective of the Get Involved Strategy 2012-15 is to increase tenant involvement by 5%. Much work had been done around defining a meaning for this objective over the past two years, and tenants and staff constantly revisited this area in order to help get a clearer picture. As a result it was agreed with TIRG to split the performance indicators that measure involvement between formally involved and informally involved.

Those tenants that are formally involved are members of the formal tenant involvement structure and sit on committees or panels that are subject to terms of reference. Those that are informally involved are tenants that are active in their local community or attend events/roadshows, and/or complete surveys/consultations.

Recruitment to committees continued to be a priority, and we were currently working with the TLC and TIRG on a recruitment and retention framework to ensure that all committees are fully represented and reflect the demographic of the tenant base. A report was taken to TLC on the 7th July 2014.

The following events are planned for 2014-15:

- Tenant and Leaseholder Day- to be held on 27 September at Southill Centre 12-4pm, which will include many activities.
- Conference on the Road – 20 events been booked in order to meet tenants who had not previously been involved.
- Barge Trips – used as a networking event with tenants of social landlords to look at how more people can become involved.
- Youth Action Entertainers – this is a very successful group of 8-16 year olds who did activities such as singing and dancing at the sheltered housing schemes.
- Joint community initiatives with Osborne's – a meeting will be held next week to increase partnership working
- Edible Gardens scheme – the aim was to help provide cheaper food. There would be 5 pilot areas across the borough and are looking at a community orchard.
- Afternoon tea with Rice Close and Southernwood Close – this was a networking event to bring people together.

In addition to attending Neighbourhood Action Group meetings and Parish Council meetings, other events that the team have been involved in included:

- Tring Carnival
- Fish and Chip/lunch clubs in Supported Housing Schemes
- Supported Housing Coffee mornings – informal and an opportunity to discuss, amongst other things, the "clear landings policy".

The tenant involvement team were involved in the following projects:

- Verge Hardening

- Parking Barriers – the aim was to try and protect tenants parking. This had been very successful so far.
- Neighbourhood Agreements – Gade Tower and Westerdale – the aim is to try and overcome specific issues to create a harmonious environment.
- Rent Campaigns
- Dacorum Youth Forum
- Supported Housing Forum
- Window Cleaning tender – tenants would be involved in the specification and procurement of the tender.
- Cleaning project – the STAR survey saw low satisfaction with cleaning. It was hoped that improvement measures will be put in place to assist auditing the service. This will be reviewed after a year.

The TIRG was formed to work with the tenant involvement team to monitor progress against the strategy. Monitoring was undertaken on a bi-monthly basis. Updates are also sent to the Chair of TLC on a regular basis by the Lead Officer, Tenant Involvement.

The Strategy is a three-year plan to increase the number of tenants and leaseholders that are involved in working with the Housing Service and to give those that want to be involved a flexible choice of ways to get involved. Progress was closely monitored by tenants. A review of the strategy is scheduled for quarter 4 2014/15; this will take place with the TLC as a whole and would enable the team to set priorities for the next three to five years to help us develop a further strategy and action plan.

Keys points of discussion

Councillor Flint asked if the times had recently changed for when cleaners were allowed into blocks of flats through the fob system.

E Brooks explained that there is a new monitoring system which checked the cleaning standards once it had been carried out. Steve Tarbox, Estates & Cleaning Team Leader had worked on this issue and allocated time for each task.

Councillor N Hollinghurst said this was a very pleasing report and thanked officers for attending the Tring carnival. He suggested officers attended Tring Community Centre on a quarterly basis. With regards to parking barriers he noted that some estates had walled areas allocated for parking, however in some cases the wall was too high and therefore obstructing residents' views of their vehicles. He suggested making the walls lower or removed altogether. This is an issue for example in Roseberry Way. He asked if this could be looked into.

J Stevens was happy to look into specific areas if she is provided with the relevant details.

Councillor Mrs Bassadone asked if the window cleaning tender is for all tenants of just flats. E Brooks confirmed it was for supported housing and communal areas.

Councillor Conway noted that Emma Rothschild had been without a cleaner for some time now and asked if this would be an ongoing issue.

E Brooks said he would pass this onto Steve Tarbox and report back.

Councillor Marshall asked if the 'You are the key' campaign was successful and asked what the Youth Action welcome pack was.

J Stevens explained that they had set up the campaign with the budget available to look at tenant involvement. For the campaign, they used the radio, the Gazette, banners, YouTube and social media sites. MOSAIC the council system, was also utilised which enabled them to cross reference details with the database. This proved to be very successful and saw 24 responses, 12 of which attended events at the Old Town Hall and then 6 people were

recruited to the high level committees. In the course of the campaign, it was noted that direct mail was by far the most successful method of involving tenants.

The Youth Action welcome pack was used for younger tenants. It has emerged that children of tenants also wanted to be involved and their involvement had now increased. It was felt that a leaflet as well as a strategy was required as the work and involvement had evolved. Within the strategy would be a list of key areas the young people wanted to work on, including Health and edible gardens, raising money for DENS, education and helping those in supported housing to use the internet, and ways to spend the £500 budget for things such as a logo and t-shirts. It was noted that there were 6 young people aged between 10-17 years on the Youth Action Forum.

The strategy of the Forum could be considered by the Forum at a future meeting.

Councillor Marshall said there was some very impressive work going on with tenant involvement, but felt that there were a limited number of people involved. She feared there were too many tenants' committees bearing in mind the comparatively modest number of tenants involved.

J Stevens said that the Housing Management team had also set up a committee. At the end of quarter 4 of this current year a review will be carried out looking at the past 3 years and things gone well or things that needed improving, including the structure of tenant involvement.

Councillor Mahmood referred to some recent housing work carried out in Seaton Road and felt that this would be a good opportunity to write to the tenants affected to gain some feedback. He asked if those involved with the barge trips were private tenants and if so, could they be involved with the committees.

E Brooks explained that they were not part of the formal structure and attended the barge events to network.

J Stevens added that with regards to the request to contact tenants if housing work had recently been carried out in their area, the team had an objective for year 3, to work closely with other services, so if they were aware of planned works, then they could follow this up with tenants affected.

Councillor Mahmood asked if the council could bring on board those people who were approaching the top of the housing list to involve them early on.

E Brooks explained that the department did involve them at the pre-tenancy training, which was very successful. He agreed it was good to involve people early; but, as it would not be known how long such applicants would be waiting to be housed, he was reluctant to involve them further as it could raise unfounded expectations of being housed very very shortly.

Councillor Mahmood noted that the objective was to increase tenant involvement by 5%. He asked what the current position was with this.

J Stevens was unaware of the current figures. The TIRG needed to decide if they were going to use the formal or informal involvement information.

Councillor Mahmood noted that there had been 6 trees planted in Bennetts End, three years ago, four of which now have fruit. He hoped that they would look to plant more in the future and asked if this was an opportunity for joint working with the council.

J Stevens was unaware of this and would look into it.

Councillor Conway referred to the plan for young people to help those in supported housing get online. She noted that Emma Rothschild had WIFI set up but were now not having computers, and asked the reason for this.

J Stevens said there was more of a push towards using tablets and Smartphones.

Councillor Mahmood asked what was meant by NTO ABCDE.

J Stevens explained that they were looking to get the service accredited and the National Tenant Organisation (NTO) would do this. However feedback suggested that this was not robust enough to pursue. ABCDE were themes to which the objectives of the accreditation were, but this was not being pursued.

Councillor Marshall asked if they had received any volunteers following the STAR survey.

J Stevens said in the past they had received 1241 responses to the survey but did not get many volunteers. Therefore, the question was not asked in the recent survey.

Councillor Conway informed officers that there were still some surveys to be collected from Tring Community Centre.

Officers confirmed they would be collected and looked at manually.

Councillor Marshall noted that the Tenant and Leaseholder Committee (TLC) had received a report on the outcomes of the STAR survey and therefore asked when a report would be discussed at this committee.

E Brooks said this would be scheduled.

Councillor Mahmood referred to the recruitment campaign called 'You are the key' and said he would have preferred 'You are key'.

J Stevens noted that this had been included in the YouTube video.

Outcome

The Housing and Community Overview and Scrutiny Committee noted the report and congratulated the team on the successes discussed.

OS/169/14 WORK PROGRAMME

The committee agreed that the Community Infrastructure Levy report could be added to the agenda for the meeting on 15 October 2014.

The meeting closed at 8.38pm.