



CABINET: 8th November 2016

Report of: Borough Transformation Manager & Deputy Director of Housing and Inclusion

Relevant Portfolio Holder: Councillor J. Patterson

Contact for further information: Mrs T. Berry (Extn. 5227)
(E-mail: tracy.berry@westlancs.gov.uk)

SUBJECT: REVIEW OF TENANT ENGAGEMENT ARRANGEMENTS

Wards affected: Borough wide

1.0 PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

- 1.1 To review the costs and effectiveness of the current tenant engagement arrangements; refocusing the approach to tenant engagement using alternative models and update tenant governance arrangements.

2.0 RECOMMENDATIONS TO CABINET

- 2.1 That the tenant engagement models as outlined in Section 5 be agreed.
- 2.2 That existing Tenants and Residents Association (TRA) agreement, and financial arrangements in place with the Tanhouse Action Group (TAG), be ended from April 2017.
- 2.3 That ending of the Tenants and Residents' Forum (TRF) and changes to the governance structure be noted.

3.0 BACKGROUND

- 3.1 West Lancashire Borough Council (WLBC) has had a strong history of tenant involvement through six TRAs and TRF. However over more recent years we have seen community involvement and tenant support for the groups decreasing. This has led to 5 out of the 6 groups mutually disbanding since 2007 as they could no longer meet their objectives or demonstrate positive outcomes. This is reflected nationally as both funding and engagements models have adjusted to

more informal styles of tenant engagement and the increasing use of digital engagement.

- 3.2 A Chairs meeting was set up 2013; each month the groups come together to discuss the future direction and financial arrangements. The group was made up of the Chair plus another committee member from each group as well as the Support Services Manager and the Tenant Involvement Assistant. However, attendance at this meeting reduced and it was decided that they were no longer achieving their objectives in August 2014.
- 3.3 The gradual but significant decrease in community and tenant support has led to five out of the six groups mutually disbanding since 2007 as they could no longer meet their objectives or demonstrate positive outcomes.
- 3.4 The TRF was the over-arching group for the TRAs. However, the cost of running these meetings were high and they were poorly attended and had limited agendas. Agendas were set by the TRF members. As a way to reduce costs, the buffet lunch was removed from meetings and this saw numbers of tenants reduce further. The last formal meeting took place in November 2014 at which only 9 tenants attended. Tenants have tried to make this arrangement work but in the context of poor support felt it should be disbanded.

4.0 CURRENT POSITION

4.1 Governance Arrangements

- 4.1.1 The Tenants Scrutiny Group (TSG) has 8 tenants on the group and this continues to carry out scrutiny reviews on services to tenants.
- 4.1.2 The Landlord Services Committee (LSC) has the 4 tenant positions filled.
- 4.1.3 Both of these groups continue to operate well and meet the current HCA regulatory standards and fulfil our governance requirements.
- 4.1.4 The Homes and Communities Agency (HCA) are currently reviewing the regulatory standards and its future role. It is anticipated that the main function of the HCA will be focused on financial viability which includes value for money. Although the financial viability element does not apply to stock retained Local Authorities, the governance and value for money elements need to be demonstrated.

4.2 Tenants and Residents Association

- 4.2.1 In 2013/14 the groups were asked to estimate their running costs and this was the amount given to them. In 2014/15, the amount of grant issued to each group was their running costs minus any funding they had remaining from the previous year. This was done to prevent the build-up of surplus funds. Appendix 2 shows a table of the historical costs of operating the TRAs.
- 4.2.2 The total amount spent on supporting the groups since 2010/11 – 2015/16 is £147,342.

- 4.2.3 In order to compare how other provider organisations are supporting their tenants groups an information exercise was carried out. Details of this can be found at Appendix 3 which shows how much they are funded and the eligibility criteria.
- 4.2.4 Tanhouse Action Group Ltd (TAG) is the remaining TRA currently in existence.
- 4.2.5 To access Council provided TRA funding, TAG had to include the TRA constitutional requirements into the TAG Limited constitution. This reflected the Estate Management Board (EMB) geographical area focus of Tanhouse 1&2 only. TAG has always operated on a wider basis.
- 4.2.6 TAG moved from its office accommodation into the Tanhouse community centre in order to be more accessible to tenants and reduce costs.
- 4.2.7 There are usually approximately six committee members who attend committee meetings. Historically, annual general meetings are not quorate, as per the agreed constitution and public meetings are not well attended.
- 4.2.8 TAG have produced a report received on 26 July 2016 (Appendix 1) detailing their future plans and required funding. This report confirms there is a low level of community involvement or interest with the group.

4.3 Your Voice

- 4.3.1 In April 2015 a marketing drive was carried out to 1000 tenants to recruit tenants to join a consultation/survey group. 154 tenants joined the "Your Voice" group and this number has now risen to 195.
- 4.3.2 Your Voice members complete surveys, either by post or on line. Tenants are profiled and recruitment is planned to increase the number of tenants in it within certain age and location bands to try to maximise representation.

4.4 Tenant Inspectors

- 4.4.1 The role of the inspectors was to inspect void properties to make sure they met the agreed re-let standard before a tenant moved.
- 4.4.2 Following the feedback from inspectors the void standards improved and in the second year of inspections very few problems were highlighted. However the number of inspectors had reduced and there was no interest from recruitment drives for this role.
- 4.4.3 Tenant inspectors no longer operate, however members of the TSG can carry out inspections and mystery shopping as part of their scrutiny role when necessary.
- 4.5 This report has been discussed with the TSG for their comments. The group agreed with the recommendations based on value for money and engaging the wider tenant's base. They also agreed the timescale was appropriate as they felt it gave sufficient time for TAG to make new arrangements should they wish to remain as a group.

- 4.6 This report is to be discussed at the Landlord Services Committee on 3 November 2016 and comments will be reported back to Cabinet as appropriate.
- 4.7 TAG have been made aware of the recommendations in this report, their comments are shown in Appendix 4.

5.0 ALTERNATIVE MODELS FOR ENGAGEMENT

- 5.1 Tenant Involvement, along with many other housing services, is going through a period of change in line with Government policies, financial implications and tenant expectations.
- 5.2 Following a recruitment drive, only 3 tenants applied for the LSC and there was no interest in joining the TSG. Feedback has shown that tenants are not interested in attending formal meetings. This is not just within West Lancashire but is the same for other housing providers nationally. Therefore it is important that we concentrate our efforts to engage and get feedback by other methods which suit our tenants' needs.
- 5.3 In order to increase levels of tenant involvement and engagement it is recommended that we move to new models which contain six main activities as follows:
 - 5.3.1 *More focused engagement based on service delivery*
This would be done after tenants receive a service and complete a satisfaction survey and then reviewing the results of these. For anyone scoring a service low, they would be contacted to discuss in more detail to engage with tenants on specific service improvements.
 - 5.3.2 *Partnering with other activities and events*
Tenant Involvement staff would support other Council and partner organisation activities such as digital inclusion sessions and local events at community centres to better engage with tenants. This would be a way to measure how customers feel about services and answer any enquiries and support our digital inclusion strategy.
 - 5.3.3 *Engagement driven by Ward Councillors and Parish Councils*
A closer working relationship with Ward and Parish Councillors needs to be developed in order for more localised issues to be addressed. Councillors would inform the Tenant Involvement team of any issues they feel need to be explored with tenants or events that they feel would benefit the area. It is important that Councillors are involved with local engagement as they are elected by the community and have a greater understanding of local issues and the constraints the Council faces.
 - 5.3.4 *Project based engagement*
The Tenant Involvement team will carry out tenant feedback exercises for Housing and Inclusion Services and analyse the information to review areas for service improvement. The team will engage tenants in providing feedback about the services they have received through surveys and customer journey mapping.

This approach will also use the tenant insight data and profiling we currently hold and will help to keep this updated.

5.3.5 *Wider Tenant base*

Involvement has changed over the years with less focus being placed on attendance at formal meetings or structures. By increasing the numbers we have in our survey group 'Your Voice', we hope to engage and encourage more tenants into providing feedback on services and increase and expand on tenants' views. Additionally we would utilise digital communication to reach a wider range of customers.

5.3.6 *Governance and scrutiny arrangements*

The TSG and LSC would remain in place and continue to operate. Having tenants involved in these arrangements are still seen as good practice. Appendix 5 shows the current and proposed Governance arrangements.

5.4 Work is already being carried out to improve the way in which we engage and communicate with tenants through different channels and digitally e.g. housing applications now being digital. This will help to increase the engagement levels we have with some of the hard to reach categories such as working tenants and younger customers.

5.5 By making it easier for tenants to engage with us and using this information to drive service improvements and changes, it is hoped that tenants will feel more satisfied with services and how they interact with us.

6.0 **CONCLUSION**

6.1 As all other TRAs have been unable to sustain their groups together with TAG's limited number of community members, it would seem unlikely that it can continue long term.

6.2 TAG as a limited company and registered with the charity commission can continue to fund raise and operate independently if they so wish.

6.3 Members are reminded to note that the TRF has ceased to operate.

7.0 **SUSTAINABILITY IMPLICATIONS/COMMUNITY STRATEGY**

7.1 Tenants will still have the opportunity to influence and shape Housing Services through methods such as Your Voice, the TSG and other digital channels and engagement models. By widening the models for tenant engagement, it is envisaged that numbers will increase and this will help to build up better pictures of what is happening on estates locally. This will support the community strategy as more intelligence about local priorities and issues will be gained.

7.2 Tenants are already increasingly using the community centres in Tanhouse and Digmoor as a place to go to when seeking assistance. These new support models will help to strengthen the support of those centres.

- 7.3 By working closer with Ward and Parish Councillors it is anticipated that local events will be taking place and supported which will help to strengthen communities.

8.0 FINANCIAL AND RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS

- 8.1 The savings made by no longer supporting TAG would be approximately £11,000 based on the £6000 for rent and the £4882.88 TAG have requested in grant funding. However this funding would be still be required to support the new models of engagement.

9.0 RISK ASSESSMENT

- 9.1 The actions referred to in this report propose some risk in terms potential criticisms from TAG.

Background Documents

There are no background documents (as defined in Section 100D(5) of the Local Government Act 1972) to this Report.

Equality Impact Assessment

There is a direct impact on members of the public, employees, elected members and / or stakeholders, therefore an Equality Impact Assessment is required. A formal equality impact assessment is attached as an Appendix 6 to this report, the results of which have been taken into account in the Recommendations contained within this report

Appendices

Appendix 1 - TAG report

Appendix 2 - Historic cost analysis of operating the TRA's

Appendix 3 - Benchmarking information

Appendix 4 - TAG comments on the report – *to follow*

Appendix 5 - Proposed Governance Structure

Appendix 6 - Equality Impact Assessment

Appendix 7 – Minute of the Landlord Services Committee (Cabinet Working Group) held on 3 November 2016 – *to follow*