

Confirmed



Minutes of a Meeting of the **Scrutiny Committee** held in the Conference Room, Riverside,
Lowestoft on **Thursday, 17 November 2022 at 6.30pm**

Members of the Cabinet present:

Councillor Edward Back, Councillor Stuart Bird, Councillor Judy Cloke, Councillor Linda Coulam, Councillor Mike Deacon, Councillor Tony Goldson, Councillor Tracey Green, Councillor Colin Hedgley, Councillor Geoff Lynch

Other Members present:

Councillor Tony Cooper, Councillor Richard Kerry

Officers present: Ben Bix (Democratic Services Officer), Andy Jarvis (Strategic Director), Samantha Shimmon (Tenant Services Manager), Alli Stone (Democratic Services Officer), Heather Tucker (Head of Housing)

1 Apologies for Absence and Substitutions

Apologies were received from Councillors Beavan, Gandy, Robinson and Topping. Councillor Cooper was in attendance as substitute for Councillor Robinson.

2 Declarations of Interest

There were no Declarations of Interest.

3 Minutes

On the proposition of Councillor Coulam, seconded by Councillor Back it was by a unanimous vote

RESOLVED

That the Minutes of the Meeting held on 27 October 2022 be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

4 Matters Arising Update Sheet

The Committee noted the matters arising update sheet in relation to queries raised at the last meeting.

5 Review of How the Council Engages with Housing Tenants

The Committee received report **ES/1299** of Councillor Richard Kerry, Cabinet Member with responsibility for Housing. Councillor Kerry introduced the report by summarising that whilst the typically elderly demographic of Council tenants had not changed, the method for engaging with tenants had changed over the years. Previously, tenants would be visited by a Council representative to collect rents, but in recent years payments had become electronic, and engagement had become more modern, using a tenants magazine and text messaging. The Council wanted to better engage with its tenants and wanted feedback from its tenants about their expectations. A Tenancy Engagement Strategy was currently in production which would propose a model of engagement that would include a Residents Board and a Tenant Scrutiny function made up of tenants and residents (leaseholders).

The Chairman invited questions from Members. Councillor Coulam asked whether Housing Officers had a schedule of visiting all tenants. The Cabinet Member confirmed that tenants properties were visited annually for gas and electrical maintenance testing, and that during the pandemic, Norse employees had been asked to be proactive in checking on residents that they knew to be vulnerable. The Head of Housing concurred and emphasised that engagement needed to be targeted and prioritised according to risk, rather than visits to each and every tenant. A programme of stock condition surveys would be forthcoming as part of a new Asset Management Plan, and consequentially repairs operatives who were skilled in identifying concerns, would be visiting tenants homes.

Councillor Lynch observed that the questions asked of tenants in the Survey of Tenants and Residents (STAR) questionnaire were mostly designed to elicit satisfaction ranking responses and asked whether a question could be introduced in the future to ask tenants if they would be willing to part fund improvements to their home. The Head of Housing responded that the questionnaire used nationally standardised questions to enable benchmarking with other providers; and that future questionnaires would be aligned to tenant satisfaction measures. The Cabinet Member cautioned that the Council were unable to offer bespoke improvements to homes due to the standardised materials stocked for replacement, repairs and maintenance. A bespoke kitchen installed by a tenant would, for example, be replaced with a standard kitchen when the property next became void.

Councillor Lynch asked whether elderly tenants currently in larger homes were asked whether they would like to downsize in the future, in order for the Council to then match vacant smaller properties with those tenants. The Tenancy Services Manager explained that a cash for moving scheme aimed at tenants of 3- and 4-bedroom properties was actively promoted; and the Cabinet Member cautioned that elderly people found vacating their home a wrench. Accordingly, the Council's role was more about promoting retired living schemes and offering support for wellbeing.

The Chairman queried whether the sample size of 100 tenants was representative of tenants' views. The Head of Housing clarified that the sample size was 100 tenants per month, chosen to achieve a representative sample and randomised. Whilst some providers surveyed all tenants annually, the Council's method was observed as good practice by Housemark - the leading data and insight company for housing. In response to the Chairman's question about the response rate of 30%, the Head of Housing explained that qualitative feedback was valued and the follow-up phone calls provided useful data and led to tenant participation in workshops.

Councillor Deacon was concerned about digital exclusion and asked whether paper copies of the survey were circulated to those tenants without mobile phones. The Tenancy Services Manager explained that previously when the survey was paper-based, the response rate was very low. The use of landline call-back conversations to encourage feedback had proven to be more effective. The Cabinet Member further advised that the relevant Ward Councillors had been involved directly in the St Peters Court residents group meetings.

In response to Councillor Deacon, the Strategic Director explained that the previous Waveney District Council (WDC) had a good relationship with its tenants, but along with other providers, engagement tended to be less formal than what was expected now. In 2006, tenants were offered a choice of whether to remain with WDC as landlord or move to a Housing Association provider and tenants had chosen to stay with the Council, which indicated that they were satisfied. The Tenants Participation Advisory Service (TPAS) report had been proactively commissioned by East Suffolk Council, post Covid-19 to provide a catalyst and framework for the Council to develop its Tenant Participation Strategy.

Councillor Green was concerned about the safeguarding of vulnerable tenants and asked what data was held about each tenant, and whether the data could be accessed by those taking calls from tenants to mitigate risk. The Head of Housing explained that whilst no formal database was in use, scheme managers knew their tenants well, tenants may not self-classify themselves as vulnerable or may not wish for their information to be stored. Similarly, the circumstances of tenants could change during their tenancy, and they may become more or less vulnerable. Each tenant was required to declare their information in full when they signed up to their tenancy. The Chairman concurred that the Council had to consider data protection legislation when holding data about its tenants.

Councillors Deacon and Green spoke about the unsatisfactory recent interactions that they had had with the out of hours service, which was a single council wide telephone number and not bespoke for housing needs. Councillor Green emphasised that it would be helpful to understand what information responders and duty officers had when taking calls from or engaging directly with tenants, and the Head of Housing undertook to liaise with Councillors Deacon and Green and to provide a summary for the Matters Arising update sheet.

In response to Member's further questions and observations, Officers explained that:

- The tenants magazine was circulated twice yearly, and it was envisioned that tenants would be asked if they still wanted to receive the magazine in a same format as currently.
- Communications with tenants tended to be targeted to tenants, and typically the Council's own East Suffolk Magazine wasn't suitable, but would be used where relevant. There was a cost to paper-based communications, and good practice indicated that there were further opportunities in electronic communications to explore.
- Tenants would be engaged in workshops to co-design the engagement strategy, which was expected to be adopted by the end of March 2023. It was desirable that the workshops would be for tenants, rather than Councillors. Ward Members would be briefed on the outcomes of workshops in their Wards.
- A formalised model would be developed with tenants and would include themed workshops, a Residents Board and a Scrutiny function to ensure tenants would be part of the Landlord Governance Model.

- The Annual Report which would provide tenants with statistics from the last financial year would be delivered to tenants early in 2023
- Third party assurance was provided on repairs and maintenance, as well as gas and electrical safety checks. There would be a follow up survey on how third parties had engaged with tenants in their homes.
- Whilst there wasn't generally a problem with Officers accessing tenants homes when necessary, a process review was underway to examine what to do in the event of a tenant refusing entry to the property.
- The Council wanted more challenge from and engagement with its tenants and the strategy would enable that, the housing sector was changing post Covid and Grenfell and tenants were now at the forefront of improvement.
- The Council was not alone amongst providers in not formally adopting an engagement strategy before and had recognised that a more formal approach was needed. Resources had been allocated accordingly and Members could be satisfied that the Management of the team had stabilised and that the 48 actions recommended in the TPAS report would guide the work of the tenancy team.
- TPAS would be engaged again once the strategy was drafted and the Local Government Association would be engaged in the future to provide peer challenge and assurance around progress.
- There was an Officer Board in place comprising Officers from the Council's Communities and Housing teams to ensure that there was alignment on community projects, such as Ease the Squeeze, and to help residents to tackle cost of living challenges.

The Chairman invited the Committee to debate the report. Councillor Cooper observed that resources may not be sufficient to achieve all the actions from the TPAS report, as well as a programme of stock condition surveys. The Cabinet Member emphasised that resources, including the recruitment in December 2021 of a full time Tenant Engagement Officer funded from the Housing Revenue Account, were already being aligned to compliance initially, and would be kept under review by Officers.

A business case for resources, as necessary could then be prepared for future years, which had the endorsement of the Committee. Councillor Goldson cautioned however that the Scrutiny Committee had similar observations on other services and consequentially, any formal review of resources would not be effective unless it was Council-wide. The Strategic Director clarified that small adjustment in resources would continue to be enabled by management where necessary, and larger resource proposals would require consideration by Cabinet. The Head of Housing explained that the Business Plan for the service would be reviewed to create the right conditions as a consequence of legislative and compliance change.

The Chairman thanked the Cabinet Member and Officers for their attendance and participation.

RESOLVED

That the report be noted and the Cabinet Member and Officers report back to Members on the following Matters Arising:

- Can the Ward Members be briefed on the outcome of Tenant Engagement workshops that take place in their Ward?
- What information about tenants do the Out of Hours call responders hold? Particularly with regard to vulnerable tenants.

- The Head of Housing to consider feedback from Councillors Deacon and Green about their recent interactions with the out of hours service.

6 Scrutiny Committee Work Programme

The Chairman advised Members that the Committee would sit as the designated Crime and Disorder Committee at its meeting on 15 December 2022. The Committee would scrutinise the latest Community Safety Partnership Action Plan, in accordance with the Crime and Disorder (Overview and Scrutiny) Regulations 2009. Members had been canvassed by email to indicate their preference for which topics of the Action Plan would be reviewed, and the two topics chosen by Members were:

1. Violence against women and girls, and
2. Anti-Social Behaviour

The Chairman reminded Members that:

- The December meeting would not be about general policing or crime issues, as that was the distinct and separate role of the Police and Crime Panel.
- Once the Crime and Disorder review had concluded, the Cabinet Member Scrutiny Session for Councillor Stephen Burroughes, Cabinet Member for Customer Experience and Operational Partnerships would take place.
- The Annual Report for 2021/22 agreed at the September 2022 meeting, would be considered by Full Council on 23 November 2022; and
- Further to the decision at the September meeting, an Extraordinary Committee meeting would be held on Thursday, 26 January 2023 at 6.30pm at the Riverside Offices, Lowestoft to review the governance arrangements for the Council's Local Authority Trading Companies (LATCOs).

The meeting concluded at 8.17pm

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Chairman