

## Item 7

### **Briefing Report to the Decent & Affordable Homes Policy Development Group (PDG): The Review of Tenant Involvement Arrangements**

**Prepared by Claire Fry, Housing Services Manager**

The regulatory framework for social housing is operated by the Homes & Communities Agency (HCA). The framework is based on the principle of co-regulation. In accordance with this principle, Councillors who govern local authority housing services are responsible and accountable for the delivery of their organisation's social housing objectives.

The regulatory framework consists of a number of standards, not all of which apply to stock which is retained by local authorities. The consumer standards do apply to the Council's stock, which have been set so that tenants, landlords and stakeholders understand the outcomes expected of the Housing Service. Councillors are responsible for ensuring that the standards are met, in accordance with the framework. However, the regulator does not have a proactive role in monitoring compliance and will only intervene in cases of serious detriment. Housing providers such as the Council and the Councillors responsible for the Housing Service are expected to ensure that all activities are transparent so that tenants, service users and other stakeholders can scrutinise and ensure that the outcomes required by the relevant standards are being delivered.

The regulatory framework clearly states that tenants should have opportunities to shape service delivery and to hold Councillors to account. To achieve this, providers are expected to engage meaningfully with their tenants and to offer them opportunities to shape the tailoring of services to shape local priorities. In particular, the Council, as a landlord, is expected to give tenants an opportunity to scrutinise performance, identify areas for improvement and influence future delivery. Consequently, the Housing Service is expected to provide training opportunities for tenants to help them to develop their skills and capacity so that any engagement and scrutiny is effective.

The Council has to demonstrate that it understands the particular needs of its tenants.

In accordance with the Tenant Involvement and Empowerment standard, registered providers (RPs) of social housing shall provide choices, information and communication which is appropriate to the diverse needs of their tenants in the delivery of all standards. The Housing Service is therefore required to ensure that tenants are given a wide range of opportunities to influence and to be involved in the development of housing related policies and strategic priorities; and in the decision-making relating to the delivery of housing related services including agreeing service standards. Tenants should also be given an opportunity to agree local offers for service delivery and to scrutinise the performance of the Housing Service. In particular, they should be empowered to make recommendations about how

performance might be improved. The Housing Service is also required to understand and respond to the diverse needs of tenants.

There are several specific expectations arising from the Tenant Involvement and Empowerment standard: in particular, RPs are expected to provide performance information to enable tenants to scrutinise their performance and this should be relevant and must be provided in a timely way. This information must be provided in a form which is agreed with tenants. In addition, RPs must provide an annual report which should include information on repair and maintenance budgets. RPs are also expected to provide support to tenants to build their capacity to be more effectively involved.

The Housing Service offers a wide range of opportunities for tenants to get involved:

- The Scrutiny and Improvement Group (SIG)
- Housing News 4U : editorial panel
- Tenant Inspectors who inspect void properties and assist with reviewing work undertaken as part of the planned maintenance contract
- Estate Representatives
- Local Voice Events
- Devon Housing Options Events
- Focus Groups (such as the one which reviewed the ASB policy and procedures in 2012)
- Tenant training
- There is a vacancy for a Leaseholder representative on the SIG at present
- Via Facebook and Twitter

Although there can be up to twelve members of the SIG, currently there are six tenant members. A Councillor attends the meetings to represent the Decent & Affordable Homes PDG and currently this is the Chair of the PDG. The SIG routinely analyses performance data, reviews policies and procedures and is currently working on a service review relating to rechargeable repairs. They have also been involved in the publication of the Annual Report for 2012/13 and the theme and the cover were actually based on an idea put forward by the Chair of the SIG.

This year, the Housing Service ran two “Making Your Money Go Further” events at Cullompton in May and at Crediton in June. A number of partners also attended. These included the Citizen’s Advice Bureau, Yarlinton Homes, Spectrum Housing, the Illegal Money Lending team, the Council Tax and Housing Benefit teams and Careers South West. The rationale for these events was to enable the Housing Service to consult with tenants and also to provide them with money-saving tips and help and advice about how to maximise income, and to respond to welfare reform.

A third event in Tiverton was cancelled due to poor attendance at these two earlier events. Only six people attended the one in Cullompton and only eight went to the one in Crediton despite this latter event having been very heavily publicised. The events had been advertised in the tenant newsletter, Housing News 4U, on our Facebook page and on posters in communal areas. Following the disappointing level of attendance at Cullompton, the Crediton event was also publicised by letter to all

tenants in the Crediton area and by poster which was sent to local supermarkets, Town and Parish Councils and doctor's surgeries for display.

Given the disappointing response to the events which were held, it was agreed that it would be a good opportunity to review the approach to tenant involvement activities. The Housing Service cannot justify the resources required to arrange Local Voice events if they are not going to be supported by tenants. Consequently, the Tenant Involvement Co-ordinator has been tasked with undertaking a research project. She will liaise with involved and non-involved tenants in order to find out what sort of engagement would suit different groups of tenants. The project will involve meeting with tenants in the community so she will go out and attend different events across the District, as appropriate.

On a more positive note, 79 people "like" our Facebook page. We aim to increase the number of people regularly reviewing the page and, to this end, we are planning to review the content which is posted and task the Neighbourhood teams with promoting it. This is a very cost effective way of engaging with tenants and disseminating useful information and one partner RP has used Facebook to engage with a large number of tenants in an on-line discussion about welfare reform, something which the Housing Service would like to replicate in the near future.

The Tenant Inspectors make a very valuable contribution to the work of the Voids team and we are currently working to develop the role of the Tenant Inspectors who work with the Planned Maintenance team. The Estate Representatives are empowered to work with the Neighbourhood teams to resolve repairs and other issues where they live and often attend Neighbourhood Walkabouts.

The Editorial Panel is well established and assists Officers with publishing the regular tenant newsletter.

£1000 has been set aside for training tenants and this is mainly used to support the members of the SIG to up-skill themselves usually by accessing online training.

Background papers: The Regulatory Framework for Social Housing 2012 (HCA)  
<http://www.homesandcommunities.co.uk/sites/default/files/our-work/regfwk-2012.pdf>  
For more information: Contact Mrs Claire Fry, Housing Services Manager –  
Telephone 01884 234920 ([cfry@middevon.gov.uk](mailto:cfry@middevon.gov.uk))