

Challenge for Change

Scrutiny Report Community Engagement





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1. Introduction and Background

- 1.1 Following approval from the Board of the Council Housing Service, a customer scrutiny panel was established. Recruitment was open to tenants, leaseholders and customers of the Council Housing Service. The Community Engagement team, with independent support and advice from the Tenant Participation Advisory Service (TPAS), successfully recruited a team of scrutinisers.
- 1.2 It was decided to call the group Challenge for Change. Throughout this report, the scrutiny group will be called C4C.
- 1.3 The initiation of the project during Summer 2013 was completed by four main scrutinisers; Linda Moxon, Ian Alexander, Michelle Cook and Tony Merrygold. One other, Richard Bailey, was also involved in the project in the early stages.
- 1.4 Following feedback from the City Wide Forum the C4C scrutinisers elected to focus on Community Engagement. At the forum other topic suggestions were put forward to the group for scrutiny. However, due to C4C having only five volunteers at the time, it was decided that more volunteers would be required for those particular topics and after discussion at a group meeting it was decided that Community Engagement would be the group's next project.
- 1.5 C4C considered many factors in its decision to scrutinise the Community Engagement services of Sheffield City Council's Housing Service. It had a clear remit to identify if they could develop recommendations to improve the involvement levels of Community Engagement amongst all service user groups especially those who are under-represented in groups and forums.
- 1.6 In this report, C4C have detailed the findings following its investigations. C4C have spoken to area managers, assistant managers and support staff from within Sheffield Council Housing.
- 1.7 C4C have additionally spoken to tenants and residents to gather their views and opinions on where Community Engagement could be improved.
- 1.8 C4C reviewed the Council Housing website and relevant leaflets to analyse whether the service is working well and providing good value for money for all customers.
- 1.9 C4C have made several recommendations based on its findings, which can be found at the end of this document.
- 1.10 The overall purpose of the project was to examine the Community Engagement service and ensure that tenants, residents and TARAs are receiving a quality service, delivering on its promises and providing Sheffield Council Housing with value for money.

2. Objectives

2.1 From C4C's initial research into Community Engagement, it identified the following objectives for this project.

- To understand the recruitment policy for getting involved. Are there different criteria for different types of involvement? What are the obstacles/barriers/failures?
- To understand how tenants learn/find out about getting involved
- To determine whether publicity is effective and fit for purpose
- To understand what the benefits are to individuals of becoming involved
- To understand why people do get involved
- To understand and explore the “volunteer journey”
- To understand the reasons why people stop being involved – is it clear what involvement entails?
- To understand how the performance and effectiveness of involvement is measured
- To understand if innovation and new technology is being used to enable involvement
- To understand how much involvement people actually want
- To find out if “virtual” forums are in existence/planned. Do they work? Is the ETara used?
- To understand the level of TARA involvement



3. Findings

3.1 Overview from the Community Engagement team and an Assistant Manager in an Area Team

3.1.1 What is Community Engagement?

3.1.2 We had a discussion with staff from the Community Engagement team and the North West housing area team to learn what Community Engagement is all about.

3.1.3 Community Engagement can be several different things – another phrase that is often used is “getting involved”. So what does “getting involved” mean? It is all about having your say to make a difference to services you receive and the communities you live in.

3.1.4 How you do this is up to you and what your landlord offers. Different methods of getting involved were explained which include –

- Tenant and Resident Associations (TARAs)
- Partnership Groups
- Governance
- Future of Council Housing Project’s Service Design Groups

3.1.5 Community Engagement is publicised in The Bridge, a magazine that goes out to all TARAs, as well as In Touch which goes out to all tenants.

3.1.6 We found that there are three main reasons why people get involved –

- To make a difference
- To meet new people and share experiences
- To try to improve the service

3.1.7 People can also become Tenant Inspectors.

3.1.8 North West is a typical area where there are 10 active and well supported TARAs. The TARAs meet as a group bi monthly with the Tenant Liaison Officers (TLOs). They are also involved in participatory budgeting, helping to decide how some of the areas resources are allocated.

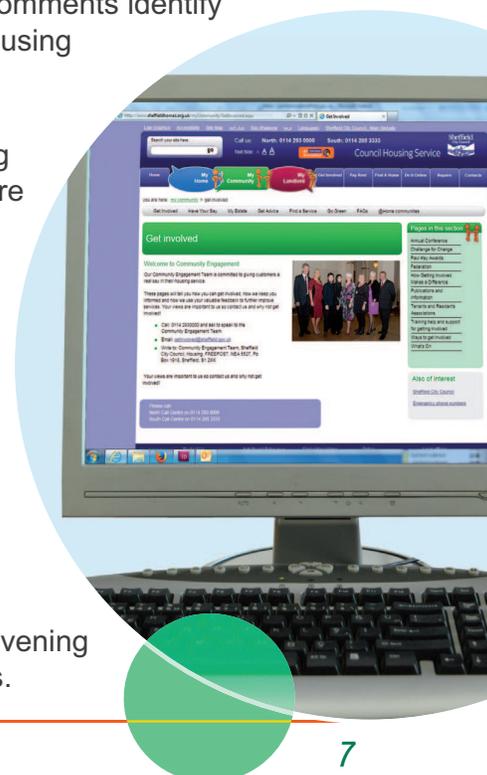
3.2 Tenant Surveys

3.2.1 As part of C4C’s investigations, a questionnaire was devised which was used to gather and collate responses from Tenants and Residents.

- 3.2.2 From the evidence gathered from the tenants it was clear that the majority were not aware of Community Engagement services within Sheffield Council Housing or the opportunities to get involved as volunteers.
- 3.2.3 20 people were interviewed in different locations of the city. From the results of the survey 83% of those interviewed stated that they had no involvement as a volunteer. The survey results additionally identified that 58% were not aware of opportunities to get involved, and 28% had some awareness.
- 3.2.4 From the responses it interestingly identified that 78% of those surveyed would not be interested in volunteering opportunities with the Council Housing Service if they were aware of them.
- 3.2.5 C4C discovered from the survey and conversations with tenant that the lack of volunteers was generally down to a feeling of apathy and a lack of communication from Community Engagement regarding the opportunities available to the wider community.
- 3.2.6 See also Appendix 4.

3.3 TARA Survey

- 3.3.1 C4C conducted a survey with all TARAs throughout the city to gather evidence of the way the Council Housing Service involves customers in Community Engagement. 14 out of 63 replied - a response rate of 22%. The majority of the replies received reported that the service level from Community Engagement was generally favourable.
- 3.3.2 Of those that responded, 57% considered that they are aware of the support the Council Housing Service provides for their TARA. The comments identify that the TLO service is a very helpful service and the housing service provides a good level of support when required.
- 3.3.3 There were a few comments to suggest that the Housing Service was offering minimal/no support and TARAs were not satisfied.
- 3.3.4 There were a range of views of how tenants and residents could become more involved in Community Engagement. These ranged from:
 - Having events as well as regular meetings
 - Wider advertising of volunteering opportunities
 - TARAs promoting a friendly, welcoming and more enthusiastic approach
 - Provide a varied meeting time schedule, e.g. have evening meetings for people who work or have commitments.



3.3.5 The survey respondents suggested several approaches the Council Housing Service could consider in order to encourage more people to be involved in opportunities. Below is a summary of the comments.

- Be less obstructive and support new and inventive ways
- More advertising
- Hold roadshows around each estate and inform levy payers what people do
- Provide details of tenant's email addresses

3.3.6 The survey identified that several of the TARAs consider that they have limited impact on the Council Housing Service both within their area and city. Comments ranged from:

- We can talk all we like but the council do what they want
- None – The council do as they wish and ignore debate
- We have more of an impact within our local area as this is what concerns people

3.3.7 There were some positive comments of TARAs having an impact with Community Engagement through the Council Housing Service:

- Our TARA has a good impact with community groups like kids clubs and we have a voice that gets listened to at City Wide Forum and partnership groups
- We provide a channel for information and hope to influence policy

3.3.8 See also Appendix 3

3.4 Community Engagement Team

3.4.1 C4C interviewed the manager of Community Engagement and another member of the team to find out what the purpose of Community Engagement is, and specifically to identify what the role of their team is.

3.4.2 They described their role, which includes:

- Maintaining a database of volunteers
- Acting as a link between volunteers and TARAs
- To assist TLOs dependent on the complexity of TARA issues
- Manage the City Wide Forum, Community Engagement Partnership Group and the Annual Tenant Conference

3.4.3 They explained that information is given out to new tenants when they sign up about TARAs and volunteering. It was felt that there could be more opportunities for TARAs to become involved with new tenants.



3.4.4 They believe there is also a role for TARAs to be active in recruitment in their local areas.

3.4.5 They told us that they have had some success using volunteers in specialist subjects through Voluntary Action Sheffield (VAS), who have worked with a few TARAs.

3.4.6 It was explained the Housing+ role could potentially encourage more tenants to become involved in their local community.

3.5 Assistant Director

3.5.1 C4C interviewed an Assistant Director to ask questions on how he sees the role which Sheffield Housing Service plays in engaging tenants, leaseholders and customers to being involved in Community Engagement.

The key points are summarised:

3.5.2 Community Engagement is all about information giving, scrutiny and seeking ideas. All encompassing a differing level of interaction, ranging from taking surveys (500 people every quarter), to investigating how open and transparent a group are performing, and also seeking tenant's views and ideas for future projects.

3.5.3 There seems to be too much information gathered from existing partnership groups. This is in the main due to the fact that several of the group's tend to have the same individuals attending which leads to the same views being aired.

3.5.4 A very small cross section of tenants are involved with Community Engagement. There needs to be a fairer way to ensure a better representation in all areas. The Council Housing Service should endeavour to visit or communicate with every tenant to discuss ways to get involved.

3.5.5 It appears that certain groups are not interested in actively engaging in volunteering opportunities; the Council Housing Service needs to understand what would get them involved.

- It needs to undertake more targeted advertising ie. to encourage participation
- Reaching out to under-represented groups, especially the teenagers and early 20s through social media channels eg Facebook, Twitter etc. as an alternative to attending meetings and offer an opportunity for them to get involved and engaging with their community services.
- There needs to be a higher visibility of engagement teams on the streets, speaking to the public that are missed by the TARAs.
- A more tailored approach to attracting more BME participants. Speak to BME volunteers who are already involved to gain insights as to the best approach and ideas to the best way forward for encouraging participation.

3.5.6 The Housing Service needs to improve its recruitment strategy to get more people involved. More access is required for information on all residents. The apprentices need to be on the estates where residents see them and lead by example.

3.5.7 A massive recruitment drive is needed, for new faces, Job Centres and colleges could be more involved in people doing voluntary work to enhance their job opportunities.

3.6 Tenant Liaison Officers (TLO's)

3.6.1 C4C held a meeting with TLOs to get an understanding of their role working with TARA's.

They outlined a summary of their role:

- As a link between different areas and the council to help to form new TARAs
- To help TARAs understand and implement the recognition policy
- To be the eyes & ears between the community and the Council
- We help & advise with funding, newsletters and setting up new projects.

3.6.2 The TLOs outlined that they try to attend meetings with tenants as often as possible but because of working schedules they may not be seen around as much during the normal working day. More contact is now made via phone/email.

3.6.3 The TLOs commented that they aim to ensure customers sustain long term viability, by early intervention when needed, also ensuring a quick turnaround is implemented when needed.

3.6.4 The TLOs try to involve local church groups and also work closely with schools, colleges, junior wardens etc. They endeavour to engage the public in social activities, and try to change the public's perception of Community Engagement.

3.7 Senior Manager within Communities at Sheffield Council

3.7.1 C4C asked how will the introduction of Housing+ work towards improving Community Engagement?

3.7.2 The council want to use a new language referring to service users instead of just TARAs. It would give a strong commitment to improving tenants' say on the services they receive.

3.7.3 Housing+ also holds opportunities for the future, for more individual tenants to be involved, and a stronger voice for people and neighbourhoods who are not heard. All the ideas came from the people involved within the Future of Council Housing Groups.

- 3.7.4 There is a lot of work to be done, particularly around further consultation. Historically, there is a culture of a lack of trust - a 'them and us attitude'. Community Engagement does happen in housing, however it is done in isolation concentrating on the TARAs.
- 3.7.5 Council cuts in the Housing Service will have an impact and there will be fewer services in the wider community. We will look at what people can do for themselves. All tenants are customers of other council services, all resources/ services/groups must work together better than they do now. It is a change in culture.
- 3.7.6 Some good work has been done. We are genuinely trying to improve. The success of C4C is some proof of this.
- 3.7.7 Sheffield Housing Service, needs to move away from the TARA centric view; the whole power structure may need review.
- 3.7.8 Important role for a federation could be the best change in decades if done properly with people with capacity to run it. Would like to make more use of local housing forums and for them to be more tenant led.

3.8 Area Managers

- 3.8.1 C4C conducted an interview with Area Managers within the Council.
- 3.8.2 Community Engagement is a high priority and Sheffield Housing Service has dedicated 1.5 TLOs per area. The council believe the TLOs have enough knowledge and awareness about what is happening regarding issues in the wider area.
- 3.8.3 The TLOs do not receive specialised training as outside expertise is brought in to address particular issues e.g. ASB. They support the TARAs, with intensive management i.e. chairing or minuting meetings, general admin etc. This is not ideal and the council would like to see their role further developed and for TARAs to be more independent.
- 3.8.4 The council would welcome wider engagement within the city although it varies massively from community to community, and would welcome further investigation into this.
- 3.8.5 The council would welcome a more tenant led approach although it does seem to be the same groups of people who tend to be consulted.
- 3.8.6 Since the service development groups/and It's Your Shout, in the SE and NW, and other areas they are seeing an increase in attendance and willingness to chair the meetings.

3.8.7 We welcome TARAs putting area issues or welfare benefits information in their newsletter and greater use of the Council Housing Service website and social media for local issues, this could be more flexible and user friendly.

3.9 Communication

3.9.1 C4C met with the Assistant Manager from the Communications team to find out what their role is in Community Engagement.

3.9.2 It was explained that there were two main strands to communications activity – promotion campaigns and listening to customers.

3.9.3 There is a “virtual” Communications Partnership Group, with approximately 20 people replying to each topic.

3.9.4 C4C found that although there had been improvements to the Council Housing Service website, there were aspects of the “getting involved” section that need looking at. For example, keeping the content up to date, using fewer lists and making it more engaging with greater use of visual material.

3.9.5 C4C learned that the use of social media such as Facebook and Twitter is limited, and that the emphasis seems to be on providing information on activity such as evictions rather than focus on how people can get involved.

4. Budget Review for the Project

C4C were allocated a budget for the duration of the scrutiny project. The money was used to cover the costs of:

- Training
- C4C member travel expenses
- Refreshments
- Stationery and printing

5. Conclusions

- 5.1 During C4C's investigations, it consistently found that tenants and residents were unclear about what Community Engagement actually is. Most of the challengers have seen this first hand. This view is also based on the tenant surveys that we carried out.
- 5.2 C4C understands that there are difficulties in getting people involved and that there is a level of apathy amongst the community. This may be because they do not understand the difference they can make and the benefits to themselves.
- 5.3 C4C feels that improvements are needed in various aspects of communications. We feel that social media needs to be used more to encourage a wider engagement.
- 5.4 From our investigations we have found that the role of the TLO is poorly understood by both staff and TARAs and that this needs to be clarified and clearly defined.
- 5.5 C4C found that those volunteers currently involved do not represent the diversity of the community. This means that the service does not obtain views of a wider range of people.
- 5.6 C4C feels that TARAs do not operate consistently to a minimum standard. However, the new Recognition Policy will address this issue.



6. Recommendations

- R1. Promote TARAs at New Tenancy Visit and provide TARAs with contact details of new tenants
- R2. Consistent staff numbers committed to Community Engagement and TARA support.
- R3. Staff competent to give training to tenants
- R4. Time taken up during meetings by people who monopolise them – manage them
- R5. Go to where people are – young people/ single mums
- R6. Email adverts re recruitment activity
- R7. Use social media to feedback on action taken and ask new tenants to use Facebook
- R8. Monthly campaigns using social media on specialist topics
- R9. Ask Job Centres to encourage people to get involved and provide better links
- R10. Use tenants that are involved to promote benefits
- R11. Recruit to specific things not general and promote the fact that volunteers can pick and choose how much involvement they would like
- R12. Clearer role for TLOs – role in the community and for this to be communicated
- R13. Campaign to tell people benefits of getting involved
- R14. Use more “event driven” recruitment in “special” locations
- R15. Revamp the communication strategy and explain/define/promote what Community Engagement actually is and possibly rename as something more meaningful
- R16. Offer flexible involvement – home based / not dependent on attending meetings
- R17. Use video clips on website / blogs / meet the manager web chats / good news stories / links to Facebook
- R18. Use a wide variety of methods to recruit volunteers and involve tenants in the process
- R19. Integrate the Council Housing Service within the main Council website
- R20. Make the website more attractive with less text / more visuals and provide appropriate links to relevant external organisations
- R21. Consider renaming TLO as Tenant and Community Liaison Officer - TCLO
- R22. The new recognition policy should be reasonably and consistently applied and enforced where appropriate
- R23. A minimum TARA communication standard should be applied across all areas e.g. at least one newsletter a year
- R24. TARAs should be encouraged to share good practice
- R25. Provide information to levy payers about how the levy is used
- R26. Promote types of involvement that do not involve attending meetings and research what people are actually interested in
- R27. Use case studies to publicise the impact of involvement and provide regular updates
- R28. Navigation on the website needs to be made easier – especially the mobile platform. Links should be easier to find

Acknowledgements

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Assistant Manager and Housing Coordinator - Community Engagement Team
Assistant Manager - North West Housing area
Assistant Manager - Future of Council Housing Project Team
Assistant Manager - Communications Team
Assistant Director - Council Housing Service
Assistant Director - Business Strategy
Area Managers
Tenant Liaison Officers
TARAs



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