

A fresh approach to engaging with our tenants and residents

Consultation proposal

September 2017

Summary

This paper presents a proposal for refreshing our approach to engaging with our tenants across the City. Having the right engagement structure in place is important to maintain our role as an effective landlord. The Housing Act 1985 (s105) places a duty on local authorities to consult with secure tenants on 'matters of housing management'. There is also a requirement for the Council to comply with the 'Tenant Involvement and Empowerment' standard regulated by the Homes and Communities Agency (HCA).

The level of resources dedicated to engagement have been reduced through the recent restructure so it is important that we use those that remain in the most effective way possible to meet our duties and responsibilities. With Housing+ becoming more embedded in neighbourhoods and a review of the TARA Recognition Policy overdue, this is a good time to review our engagement framework and present a fresh approach to engaging with our tenants.

Our Ambitions

The starting point for defining our ambitions is the vision from the 2015/16 tenant-led task and finish group on Community Engagement:

*'Community engagement will be a framework through which all residents in our neighbourhoods can actively engage with our services. It will be open and inclusive, and **use a range of engagement methods** to help **minimise the barriers** to people being involved and included. Effective consultation will result in **clear outcomes for communities** – empowering residents to **make and influence decisions** which affect them, in turn resulting in flexible services which are tailored to meet the needs of the local community. People will have confidence that we value their views, have listened to them and that we will act upon them'.*

This remains our over-arching vision for engagement. Alongside this, the Member Housing Policy Group has developed a set of ambitions for refreshing the overall framework for engagement:

1. We want a fresh approach to engagement with focussed city wide meetings and more local and individual involvement
2. We want more on-line engagement ensuring that everyone is able to have their say
3. We want a clear funding system that delivers real support and change across communities
4. We want representative TARAs to work with each other, Ward Councillors and with other VCF partners to make a real difference

These ambitions have set the context for the more detailed proposals contained in this paper.

Ambitions 1 and 2 – Detailed proposals - Connected and inclusive

These are our detailed proposals to deliver a more connected and inclusive engagement framework:

- More focussed citywide meetings – There are currently about 35 citywide meetings each year for residents and TARA representatives. This proposal would reduce the number of meetings to 15 per year:
 - 3 Citywide Forums per year as currently

- A single monthly service improvement meeting to replace all the existing Partnership Groups. The meeting could be themed by service area or have a mixed agenda depending on relevant topics.
- Quarterly Local Housing Forums to replace existing LAHF/LESIF structure. These would be more flexible without a fixed agenda and tailored to the needs of each Neighbourhood Team. We are also starting to look at even more localised engagement at a Ward level and may bring forward further proposals around this at a later date
- Explore the increased use of social media for communicating with residents around housing issues to widen our engagement and involvement demographic
- Less reliance on traditional printed media – introducing on-line editions of 'In Touch' and 'Your TARA News'. We will continue to produce smaller quantities of printed material for those people who need them
- Provide more on-line support to encourage residents to get the benefits of being on-line. We will
 - Introduce a 'Digital TARA' grant for TARAs to support them to get on-line. We will also develop a package of support with help in setting up e-mails and e-comms.
 - Build on existing training and support to get tenants on-line
- Explore further the role for Neighbourhood Officers in widening engagement. Our front-line housing staff have direct contact with tenants and residents through their daily activities and we want to ensure that we maximise these contacts to involve and engage.

Ambition 3 – Clear funding arrangements

TARAs are funded currently through the tenant's levy – an optional 10p per week payment made by tenants and administered by the Council. Levy payments are made each quarter to recognised TARAs to support their activities in the community. The TARA Recognition Policy sets out the arrangements for ensuring TARA probity in both financial and governance matters. An additional Community Fund grant pot is also available to TARAs to support projects that cannot be funded through their levy receipts. We want to introduce some improvements to the way that these funds are administered. These are our detailed proposals to deliver clearer funding arrangements:

- Replace the current unpopular Recognition Policy and 'traffic light' system with simpler Good Governance and Financial Management Requirements for TARAs
- Simplify the administration of the tenant levy by making 2 payments per year – one on completion of the AGM Annual Return and one six months later following a General Meeting update
- Provide more 'good practice' support to TARAs to help them develop their organisations and membership
- Refresh the Community Fund application process, making funds available to both TARAs and other local community groups (with projects benefitting tenants).
- Link the Community Fund more closely to the Ward priorities and follow similar mechanisms for allocation, application and award of funding. Decisions will be made by a panel made up of a Ward Councillor, Housing Neighbourhood Team Manager and local independent representative e.g. Police

- Include funds held in the Residual Levy account (levy paid by tenants where no TARA currently operates) into the refreshed Community Fund grant pot and allocate this through the same mechanism*

* Residual Levy funds will be 'ringfenced' for the communities where the levy was collected and only added to the Community Funds available for that Ward. Residual Levy funds will be added to the Community Fund pot in three equal annual amounts rather than the full balance being available in year 1

- We are not proposing any changes to the way that the tenants levy is collected or passed on to TARAs as part of this review. However we will be undertaking further work to understand the level of indirect subsidy that TARAs receive when their opted-in levy payers don't pay their tenancy charges – i.e. are in rent arrears. This may result in further proposals during 17/18.

Ambition 4 – Working together

These are our proposals to deliver a more connected and inclusive engagement framework (these are our longer term proposals to deliver a more connected and inclusive engagement framework. We are not consulting on them at this stage):

- Closer links with Locality Teams – linking TARAs to other local community groups to increase the impact in local neighbourhoods
- Improved links with other public sector partnerships
- Explore options for sharing community spaces with VCF or other partners to reduce the number of dedicated concessionary lets being funded for TARAs
- As part of a wider Council review of community buildings, consider changes to the way that we currently support TARAs with additional funding for community meeting space to improve consistency