

Housing Scrutiny Committee

Themed Review 2021-22

Resident Engagement

Chair's Introduction

In my 16 years as a councillor, I have been lucky to have held a number of positions on the Council, both as Cabinet Member and scrutiny Chair. Sometimes housing feels like the missing jigsaw piece in the puzzle of issues that can affect our residents. Certainly as a ward councillor, I know that the bulk of enquiries in my inbox relate to housing issues. I've often found that in resolving this casework, the issue is often one of miscommunication rather than being symbolic of deeper problems within our housing service. However, even if the solution is relatively simple, I understand this can leave residents frustrated. They need to feel they have a service they can trust. Delays happen, but residents need to understand why.

In chairing this themed review, I wanted to understand more about how the Council actively involves its residents. Housing Scrutiny regularly takes reports on the strategy, policies and performance of the housing service. The last year has seen several reports on building safety – not just what the Council is doing now but also how it is preparing for potential new statutory duties. However, the voice of the resident in these reports doesn't always come through. How do they view the Council, and do they feel able to report their concerns? Are their issues responded to quickly? Do they have concerns about building safety, particularly following the terrible tragedy of Grenfell Tower? Do they trust the Council to follow through with its promises? These were questions I wanted to pursue, with the support not only of councillors and officers, but by hearing from Council residents themselves.

We were pleased in the course of the review to have the opportunity to speak to residents directly. We were also able to speak to the Independent Housing Advisor, and of course to officers and the Portfolio Lead Member for Housing and Homelessness Prevention, Cllr Louise Mitchell. I would like to thank everyone who contributed to the review: Cllr Mitchell, for her clear commitment to always improving residents' lives; the officers, for their dedication and hard work; and above all, the residents, who gave up their time to speak to committee members and identify how resident engagement could be better. I am pleased to present the recommendations below, and look forward to seeing how they are taken up and addressed by the new administration.

Cllr Saima Mahmud, Chair, Housing Scrutiny Committee 2021-22

Summary of recommendations

The Committee recommends:

Recommendation 1

That the new Resident Involvement Strategy explores all possibilities to enable digital engagement with residents, whilst ensuring that there are digital inclusion offers in place

Recommendation 2

That all Council staff working in housing services are involved in and responsible for the implementation of the new Resident Involvement Strategy

Recommendation 3

That the new Resident Involvement Strategy maintains its commitment to be inclusive, and builds on this work in line with the Council's Equality, Diversity and Inclusion strategy

Recommendation 4

That as part of the ongoing building engagement resident strategy, there is continued focus on communication, specifically:

- improving communication with harder to reach groups, particularly those who do not have English as a first language
- prioritising pictorial or graphic designs, particularly for immediate or urgent signage such as fire escapes
- ensuring information on fire risk assessments is made available to residents in the most appropriate and comprehensible way

Recommendation 5

That services continue to promote fire safety information to leaseholders and tenants on a regular basis

Recommendation 6

That, when legislation has been finalised, services report back to the committee on how the Accountable Person is held responsible

Recommendation 7

That the STAR panel is supported to implement a formal process between recommendations and Council responses

Recommendation 8

That the Council continues to support the STAR panel, both in providing independent advisory services to train members, and in ensuring members are involved in Council policies that affect them

Background

The past few years have seen a renewed investment on a national level to engage with social housing tenants. This was triggered by the tragedy of the Grenfell Tower fire in Kensington & Chelsea, in which 72 people died, many of them social housing tenants, and many of whom had raised safety concerns with the body that managed the tower on behalf of the local Council. The Government's legislative response to Grenfell has two approaches; the Building Safety Bill, which at the time of writing is still making its way through parliament, and the Social Housing White Paper, which has been published, although further steps towards legislation are not yet known.

Waltham Forest Council has a strong record of engaging with its social housing residents, whether tenants or leaseholders. In 2018 the Council brought forward its Resident Involvement Strategy, which ran until 2021. In 2021, the resident engagement team agreed to review the strategy; it was therefore an opportunity time to pursue this themed review with the input of the Housing Scrutiny Committee.

Separately from the new Resident Involvement Strategy, the Council is also planning to introduce a new Building Safety Engagement Strategy. This is a vital step towards ensuring residents have all the information they need on building safety, particularly as the Council's new responsibilities will become clear once legislation is finalised. The Housing Committee has already spent time scrutinising the Council's approach towards anticipating and addressing its new responsibilities around fire safety. However, this approach was very much on a governance level, to ensure the Council was fulfilling its responsibilities, rather than from the point of view of affected residents.

The Committee was able to review how the engagement team were carrying out the process of reviewing the two strategies, and speak to residents already involved to get their views.

Residents have the opportunity to be engaged or involved with the Council at a number of levels. At a minimum, this can include filling out surveys or responding to requests for opinions on social media. It can go all the way up to becoming a member of the Strategic Tenants And Residents (STAR) panel, offering steering advice and scrutiny to the Council's policies.

Councillors are ideally positioned to input into resident engagement. Housing issues are some of the most common issues that residents raise with them. Many

councillors will have social housing estates within their wards and be in touch with residents about issues regularly.

Methodology

In July 2021 the Committee was presented with an initial scoping document, and agreed to take the review forward, with a focus on how the Council was carrying out engagement. The Committee then used its meetings from October 2021 to February 2022 to review the context, speak to officers involved in drafting the strategy, hear from residents already involved in resident engagement, and make recommendations.

12 October 2021¹

Shahid Mallam, Head of Housing Engagement & Insight, attended this meeting to present the work that the Council had done on the new Resident Involvement strategy so far, in particular results of a recent survey of leaseholders and tenants. He noted that the survey had been sent to all residents, and leaseholders were slightly overrepresented among the respondents. The survey was a key method by which the Council could identify what had worked well in the previous strategy, and what could be improved on. Richard Tomkinson, Independent Housing Advisor, was also present.

As a result of responses to the survey, Mr Mallam highlighted that supporting informal resident groups would continue to be a priority for the Council, not just traditional formal routes. He also noted the importance of digital engagement – although the Council has traditionally focused on face-to-face engagement, digital has become much more accepted and ubiquitous since the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic. Although many groups are still ‘digitally excluded’, improvements have been made over the pandemic. Cllr Mitchell, Portfolio Lead Member for Housing and Homelessness Prevention, noted that although online forums were a good place for the Council to disseminate information, they were not ideal for residents to be able to feed back. They could use tools such as breakout spaces, but not all residents felt confident in attending these types of meetings. It was important, therefore, to ensure that any increase in digital engagement in the future went hand-in-hand with other forms.

One reflection from the previous strategy was that not enough time had been factored in to ensuring that all staff within housing services could properly deploy the initiatives set out in the strategy. Cllr Mitchell said that this had been learnt from, and capacity would be built into the new strategy.

The Committee recommended:

¹ <https://democracy.walthamforest.gov.uk/ieListDocuments.aspx?CId=721&MIId=5298&Ver=4>

- That the new Resident Involvement Strategy explores all possibilities to enable digital engagement with residents, whilst ensuring that there are digital inclusion offers in place.
- That all Council staff working in housing services are involved in and responsible for the implementation of the new Resident Involvement Strategy
- That the new Resident Involvement Strategy maintains its commitment to be inclusive, and builds on this work in line with the Council's Equality, Diversity and Inclusion strategy

15 December 2021²

At this meeting, the Committee focused on the Council's forthcoming Building Safety Engagement Strategy. As part of this, William Wood, a resident and member of the Council's resident building safety task group was invited to join the meeting.

The Committee noted the importance of involving the London Fire Brigade (LFB) in any strategy. Shahid Mallam confirmed that the LFB had been involved.

The Committee noted that communication was extremely important, and that pulling out and highlighting the most crucial areas of any plan would be vital in ensuring residents had the right information to hand at the right time. Mr Mallam noted that the building safety task group was focused on the granular detail in any fire risk assessment, but the majority of residents would simply want to know the basics. Any displayed information would need to be accessible and useable.

The Committee asked about equalities issues, and highlighted residents whose first language was not English. They asked whether key information could be made available in other languages. They also noted that pictorial signs rather than text would be the easiest way to display fire notices, if possible.

The Committee noted that leaseholders and private tenants of leaseholders would not be engaged in the same way as Council tenants. Mr Mallam stressed the importance of communicating with these groups.

The Committee recommended:

- That as part of the ongoing building engagement resident strategy, there is continued focus on communication, specifically:
 - improving communication with harder to reach groups, particularly those who do not have English as a first language
 - prioritising pictorial or graphic designs, particularly for immediate or urgent signage such as fire escapes
 - ensuring information on fire risk assessments is made available to residents in the most appropriate and comprehensible way
- That services continue to promote fire safety information to leaseholders and tenants on a regular basis
- That, when legislation has been finalised, services report back to the committee on how the Accountable Person is held responsible

² <https://democracy.walthamforest.gov.uk/ieListDocuments.aspx?CId=721&MId=5299&Ver=4>

24 February 2022³

At this meeting, the Committee reviewed the Council's Strategic Tenants And Residents (STAR) panel. They noted that the panel is made up of Council residents and leaseholders, including two members from the Council's Tenant Management organisations. A member of the STAR panel, Bert Morris, attended this meeting to discuss his experiences of the panel.

The Committee asked whether the experiences of residents as reported to the STAR panel were consistent with official reports to the Council, with reference to the performance of Morgan Sindall, the Council's contracted repairs partner. Mr Morris said that the STAR panel worked closely with Morgan Sindall to understand the cause to any delays, and how these could be resolved. He noted that there had been difficulties during the Covid-19 pandemic due to a depleted workforce, with workers leaving to return to Eastern Europe. Mr Morris said that in general, most residents were satisfied with the performance of Morgan Sindall. He expressed that residents agreed Morgan Sindall outperformed the Council's previous repairs contractor. Cllr Mitchell noted that the STAR panel had been involved in the contract process for Morgan Sindall, and had met with the potential contractors before the contract was finalised.

The Committee were keen to discuss where STAR felt they had had a real impact on Council policy. Mr Morris said that there had been several resident-led scrutiny task and finish groups in the past, and said that the parking policy group had been one of the most successful. He noted that they were about to start a specific scrutiny group for housing repairs. Mr Morris said that he was a long-time tenant of the Council – he had been involved in resident engagement for many years, including before the STAR panel was set up. He said that previous tenant groups would try and get involved with individual cases, whereas nowadays they took a more strategic approach, which was much more successful.

The Committee asked if STAR panel members felt they were provided with enough support to be able to analyse complex data and information they were given from the Council, such as performance data. Shahid Mallam noted that there was an Independent Housing Advisor commissioned by the Council, who had attended the scrutiny meeting in October 2021 – the Advisor could help with looking at complex data and what it meant for services. The members of the panel were also provided with training.

The Committee asked about how senior management were held to account. Mr Morris said that communication between the panel and senior managers was good. The panel felt able to pass their concerns back to senior managers and the Cabinet member when appropriate. Following a resident-led scrutiny group, an action plan would be produced and officers would come back to report on progress. However, he said that there was currently no process that had been formalised into the Terms of Reference of the STAR panel to set out how recommendations would be fed back

³ <https://democracy.walthamforest.gov.uk/ieListDocuments.aspx?CId=721&MIId=5300&Ver=4>

to the Council, and what action would then be taken (outside of a resident-led scrutiny group). The Committee agreed that the panel would be strengthened by having a formal procedure. This could be set out in the STAR panel's terms of reference, similar to the Council's own scrutiny committees. This would ensure that actions and recommendations were formally tracked and reported back on. It would strengthen residents' trust that their concerns were being listened to.

The Committee recommended:

- That the STAR panel is supported to implement a formal process between recommendations and Council responses
- That the Council continues to support the STAR panel, both in providing independent advisory services to train members, and in ensuring members are involved in Council policies that affect them

Key findings

Overall, the Committee was satisfied with the Council's approach to resident engagement, noting that the new Resident Involvement Strategy was building on a strong foundation. There were clearly many ways in which residents could engage with the Council, and services had made huge advances during the Covid-19 pandemic to improve digital engagement, while at the same time committing to maintaining communication methods for people without digital access. Residents felt confident that the Council would continue to communicate important changes to policy regarding building safety, and the Committee recommended that the Council continue to consider the diverse needs of its residents in communicating these changes.

The Committee also found that resident involvement on a deeper level – through the STAR panel, scrutiny groups and the new Building Safety taskforce – was held in high regard by residents. Residents truly felt that the Council listened to and acted on their findings. The groups were helpful in creating a two-way route of communication between residents and housing services.

Conclusion

This review did not take place in isolation. At each meeting, alongside hearing from the resident engagement team or an external witness, the Committee took other items relevant to Council policy, whether around new building safety obligations for the Council, how affordable housing is delivered, the Council's relationship with its Registered Providers, or how to tackle rough sleeping. Each of these issues has implications for current and future Council residents: the importance of a useful and active resident engagement strategy running through housing services was clear throughout the review.

Another takeaway from the review was how much is dependent on potential future developments in Government legislation. Phase 2 of the Grenfell Inquiry was ongoing throughout the year, and the Government has said that it will incorporate recommendations into future legislation, if necessary. In the meantime, it is continuing to advance the Building Safety Bill, which will be a significant piece of legislation with new duties for councils. The Government published a White Paper on social housing in late 2020, which sets out new rights for social housing tenants, though there is no timetable for legislation on this currently. In February 2022, the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC) produced a White Paper which includes a commitment to bring forward a Social Housing Regulation Bill.

The White Paper states:

To deliver our mission to improve housing conditions, we will introduce new legislation to improve the quality and regulation of social housing, give residents performance information so that they can hold their landlord to account and ensure that when residents make a complaint, landlords take quick and effective action to put things right.⁴

More active resident involvement is clearly a priority for the Government, which may be statutorily formalised, and it is therefore crucial that councils continue to strengthen its relationship with social housing residents. Waltham Forest is in a strong position, as demonstrated by the review, and ready to respond to future legislation and deliver for its residents. The Resident Involvement Strategy is already progressing through Cabinet and will incorporate the recommendations from scrutiny. The Housing Scrutiny Committee can continue to review the Council's approach to building safety, taking into account not only the Council's future statutory duties but how these are communicated to residents.

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https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1052046/Executive_Summary.pdf