

## REVIEW BY THE ENVIRONMENT, HOUSING AND REGENERATION SELECT COMMITTEE: *IMPROVING ENGAGEMENT WITH TENANTS AND LEASEHOLDERS*

<b>Cabinet Member(s)</b>	Councillor Eddie Lavery
<b>Cabinet Portfolio(s)</b>	Environment, Housing & Regeneration
<b>Officer Contact(s)</b>	Neil Fraser, Democratic Services
<b>Papers with report</b>	Final review report

### HEADLINES

<b>Summary</b>	To receive the final report detailing the review by the Environment, Housing & Regeneration Select Committee in 2021, which looked at the engagement with tenants and leaseholders within Hillingdon. The review makes recommendations for Cabinet to consider.
<b>Putting our Residents First</b>	This report supports the following Council objectives of: Our People; It supports the Council's Housing Strategy and also Digital Connectivity Strategy.
<b>Financial Cost</b>	There are no direct financial costs arising from the initial recommendations, however, any service changes arising will need to be funded from within approved budgets, including any external funding to the service.
<b>Relevant Select Committee</b>	Environment, Housing & Regeneration.
<b>Relevant Ward(s)</b>	All.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

**That the Cabinet welcomes the Committee's findings from their review into improving engagement with tenants and leaseholders in Hillingdon, and the recommendations outlined below, noting that their implementation will be taken forward with officers and by the Cabinet Member for Environment, Housing & Regeneration:**

## **SELECT COMMITTEE RECOMMENDATIONS:**

### **That Cabinet:**

- 1. Note the experiences and feedback from those tenants and leaseholders who attended the witness sessions and from those responding to surveys as set out in the report and, in light of the Draft Charter for Social Housing Residents, support the need to continuously improve the quality, timeliness, and breadth of the Council's engagement with tenants and leaseholders.**
- 2. Agree that officers develop, for approval by the Cabinet Member, an Engagement Strategy and associated 3-year Delivery Plan, that in particular sets out:**
  - a. The engagement options to promote resident feedback and involvement at a pace and level which suits residents, and that which supports service improvement and the resolution of matters which are important to residents;**
  - b. The opportunities for residents to engage via the use of digital tools as well as 'in-person' contact, understanding that engagement should be non-exclusionary, and not be limited to only digital means but should instead provide a breadth of options to give a voice to all tenants and leaseholders. In-person contact could include the reformation of regular Senate or Assembly meetings, alongside special interest groups, or 'Community Engagement Days' held at estates or public spaces, alongside partners and other Council services (such as the Community Safety Team, Green Spaces and Anti-Social Behaviour & Environment Team), to ensure a coordinated approach to engagement, resolution of neighbourhood issues, and collation of resident feedback;**
  - c. A schedule of further consultation to be carried out, to obtain feedback from a large and diverse subset of the Borough's tenants and leaseholders, with a view to adding to or revising the strategy in line with this feedback.**
- 3. Request that officers work with the Corporate Communications team to raise awareness of the engagement options available to tenants and leaseholders, including through the use of the Council's social media platforms, to maximise the opportunities for tenants and leaseholders to provide feedback.**
- 4. Agree that, in order to demonstrate a continued commitment to overview and scrutiny, the Environment, Housing & Regeneration Select Committee receive a yearly report for the duration of the service's 3-year plan for engagement, providing an update on the implementation of these recommendations, further actions, and continued direction of travel, supported by the latest data on tenant and leaseholder engagement and feedback.**

## Reasons for recommendations

Following consideration of all available information including that contributed by officers, together with feedback from residents both in-person and online surveys, the Committee accepted that the Council had an opportunity to effect real improvement to both fulfil the requirements of the new Draft Charter for Social Housing Residents, as well as promoting more effective engagement and support of the Borough's residents.

Throughout, the Committee was mindful that the Council's actions to meet the expectations set out in the new Draft Charter were at an early stage, and so welcomed the timeliness of the review and its ability to help steer future actions through its recommendations to Cabinet. However, the Committee was also mindful that any recommendations should be realistic and actionable, with due consideration to budgetary requirements. Additionally, it was highlighted that any recommendations should refrain from being too prescriptive, to allow officers the flexibility to tailor any actions upon receipt of further feedback from residents as engagement, whether in-person or through further online surveys, was received.

## Alternative options considered / risk management

The Cabinet could decide to reject some or all of the Committee's recommendations.

## SUPPORTING INFORMATION

In November 2020, the Government published its draft Charter for Social Housing Residents White Paper, which set out the actions central Government will take to "ensure that residents in social housing are safe, are listened to, live in good quality homes, and have access to redress when things go wrong."

The Select Committee therefore approved, as its first review, the topic of how to improve feedback from residents of social housing, in order to support the work of the Council's landlord function to help shape and update its approach to tenant and leaseholder engagement under the terms of this new Charter.

Through all information gathering, the Committee was mindful of the need to find cost-effective, workable solutions, and the recommendations in this report are endorsed as prudent, effective actions to grow engagement and fulfil the terms of the Charter.

The Committee has recommended that officers should develop an Engagement Strategy and Delivery Plan, in consultation with a selection of tenants, leaseholders, service managers and stakeholders. The strategy was to consider the common barriers to resident engagement, hard to reach groups, BMEs, single parents and young people, and was to be an evolving document with elements of further feedback, monitoring and review. It was recommended that this should be delivered over three years, fulfilling regulatory requirements of social housing providers.

It was recognised that the strategy should avoid a 'one size fits all' approach but instead should tailor its strategy to resident needs, together with their willingness or availability to become involved. It was accepted that many of the residents willing to engage with the Council were

retirees, who had more free time. The Strategy should therefore carefully consider how to engage with people with more limited time, tailoring engagement actions to fit with their own availability.

Key interaction methods identified include various assemblies and group meetings, direct contact via 'Meet the Manager' sessions, increased digital engagement including enhancements to the Council's website to ensure accessibility, and collaboration on the service's annual report. It was noted that the current pandemic has inevitably steered engagement with residents towards digital / on-line approaches and this should be considered when developing the strategy and delivery options.

Alongside this new Strategy and Delivery Plan, the Committee recommended that officers engage with the Council's Corporate Communications team to review how best to further raise awareness of the options for engagement available to Hillingdon's Council tenants and leaseholders.

Regarding the Better Neighbourhood Fund, the Committee determined that the Fund was delivering positive outcomes for residents, but suggested that officers review new ways to seek resident input into how the fund is allocated to projects through better consultation as part of the 3 year plan.

On the understanding that resident feedback, though the Survey of Tenants and Residents (STAR) and other methods outlined, would continue throughout the 3 years, it was recommended that the Committee receive further update reports at regular intervals on how the strategy was being delivered and what feedback was being captured and used by services.

Terms of Reference for the review were:

1. To understand Hillingdon's current engagement approach with tenants and leaseholders and the planned work programmes and activities that the Council engages with them on, e.g. Better Neighbourhood Fund.
2. To learn from residents of their experiences and interaction with the Council and their satisfaction;
3. To review other best practice and identify any improvement to tenant and leaseholder engagement and satisfaction going forward, including from any new legislation / regulation, e.g. the Charter for Social Housing Residents, and how the Council can best adapt to meet this;
4. To identify any gaps and opportunities to draw together different strands of activities by the Council to ensure the overall service we provide is one-stop, agile and responsive to the needs of tenants and leaseholders; and
5. To make practical, prudent recommendations to Cabinet from the Committee's findings.

## Information Gathering:

As part of its witness and evidence sessions, the Committee received evidence from the following witnesses:

- Rod Smith – Head of Housing Management
- Marion Finney – Regulation and Engagement Manager
- Alan Clark – Secretary of the Hillingdon Association of Council (Domestic) Leaseholders
- Ros Jorge - Tenant representative
- Natalie Lindsay - Tenant representative.
- Tenants and Leaseholders - via surveys

## Service Officer Comments on Recommendations where relevant (implementation)

If agreed by Cabinet, the recommendations set out a measured approach to the Council's alignment with the expectations of the Regulator of Social Housing. A 'step-change' in the role, operation and expectations of the Regulator will have a direct impact on the work and priorities of the Council in its capacity as a landlord. In particular, the Regulator has made it known that it intends to proactively regulate social landlords across a range of revised standards including meaningful engagement with tenants.

'To have your voice heard by your landlord' is seen as a 'golden thread' running through all the Standards. The development of an engagement and involvement strategy in conjunction with key stakeholders are an important commitment and 'first-step' on the road to regulatory compliance. Linked to the recommendations made, the Council's landlord service will have a clear mandate to move forward with setting out how it intends to seek out and document best practice and the range of options to support its tenants and leaseholders to engage effectively and make a real contribution to the way the services they receive are shaped, delivered and reported.

The Council's Corporate Communications service will work with the Housing team to explore various ways to promote the engagement opportunities (digital and non-digital) available for tenants and leaseholders.

## Financial Implications

There are no direct financial costs arising from the initial recommendations, however, any service changes arising will need to be funded from within approved budgets, including any external funding to the service.

## RESIDENT BENEFIT & CONSULTATION

### The benefit or impact upon Hillingdon residents, service users and communities?

The creation and implementation of a new Engagement Strategy and Delivery Plan, in line with the requirements of the new Charter, will ensure social housing residents are safe in their homes, are able to assess the performance of their landlords and are able to seek redress through a formal complaint process where necessary. Additionally, the Plan will provide greater support for landlords on their own requirements of their role as landlords.

Tenants and landlords will also be consulted throughout the process, in order to help shape the Strategy and its delivery.

### **Consultation carried out or required**

The Committee sought a wide range of internal witness testimony, as set out in the report.

## **CORPORATE CONSIDERATIONS**

### **Corporate Finance**

Corporate Finance has reviewed this report and concurs with the financial implications set out above, noting that there are no direct financial implications associated with the recommendations within this report.

### **Legal**

The Borough Solicitor confirms that the legal implications are included in the report.

## **BACKGROUND PAPERS**

NIL.