

Resident Involvement Review

Stevenage Borough Council

July 2020





Introduction

Tpas was asked to provide Stevenage BC with options for delivering scrutiny that would comply with the regulatory requirements and reflect good practice within the housing sector.

Tpas has a significant bank of resources related to resident-led scrutiny including:

- Training and development modules (including accredited learning options)
- Accreditation Products for organisations who deliver excellent scrutiny functions
- Resident-led Scrutiny Toolkits
- Case Studies from more than 200 resident-led scrutiny models and our accredited client organisations
- Published guides and policy papers
- Extensive range of model templates and examples of Scrutiny safeguards, policy documents and resources, evidence gathering tools
- Scrutiny 'How to ...' Guides
- Access to Scrutiny Lounge events and networks which offers scrutiny members the opportunity to meet with other scrutiny groups, share experiences, approaches and establish contacts. The network operates nationally on-line, regionally and locally through meeting events hosted by landlords

Tpas used all these resources to support the development of Stevenage BC scrutiny development.

Background

Stevenage BC currently have a formal centralised scrutiny group and the Housing Management Advisory Board.

The Customer Scrutiny Panel (CSP) currently comprises of six residents, one of whom is a leaseholder. There are four members who regularly attend meetings, one member has not been at meetings for a while due to ill health and the sixth member does not have access to a computer or the internet so unless someone rings him to tell him about meetings, he doesn't know about them and cannot be expected to attend.

Last year, the CSP lost its long serving Chair, and has been struggling to recruit new members.



The CSP holds three different types of meeting:

- The first type of meeting is the CSP General meetings, which take place every three months. Staff attend these meetings to update CSP members on what they have been doing and to report progress on implementing agreed recommendations from previous scrutiny activities.
- The second type of meetings are performance meetings, which take place every six weeks. Senior staff attend these meetings to go through the KPIs. The CSP then selects two service areas that are underperforming to scrutinise.
- The third type of meetings are small sub-groups of the CSP that carry out the review of the service area(s) selected and take place at least monthly.
- Support from staff is effectively in place throughout the scrutiny process

It is clear that the current formal scrutiny format is volunteer time and staff intensive. What is unclear is the impact that the scrutiny reviews have on services as indicated by members of the CSP. It is also unclear how the work of the CSP is publicised to the wider resident body.

1 Why is Scrutiny important?

Resident-led scrutiny is an important part of the business of any housing organisation. Well run, it can be a critical part of business where residents provide feedback and scrutiny in the same way as more commercial organisations such as supermarkets work, testing with customers how they are doing.

Scrutiny helps the housing organisation to understand when it might need to develop new policies, strategies and change the way they deliver services and plays an **important** role in monitoring performance. By holding the housing organisation to account it ensures that services respond to the needs of the local community and are efficient, cost effective and easy to use.

Challenge is important and no matter what format it takes, organisations need to listen to what residents are saying and make it an integral part of any review or change in services. Residents want the best from their landlords and will want to work constructively to help achieve this through a range of methods.

2 The Regulatory Framework

The Regulator for Social Housing's Tenant Involvement and Empowerment standard 2017 provides a clear framework for social landlords.



Registered providers shall ensure that tenants are given a wide range of opportunities to influence and be involved in:

- *the formulation of their landlord's housing-related policies and strategic priorities*
- *the making of decisions about how housing-related services are delivered, including the setting of service standards*
- *the scrutiny of their landlord's performance and the making of recommendations to their landlord about how performance might be improved*
- *the management of their homes, where applicable*
- *the management of repair and maintenance services, such as commissioning and undertaking a range of repair tasks, as agreed with landlords, and the sharing in savings made*
- *agreeing local offers for service delivery*

Registered providers shall support their tenants to develop and implement opportunities for involvement and empowerment, including by:

- *supporting their tenants to exercise their Right to Manage or otherwise exercise housing management functions, where appropriate.*
- *supporting the formation and activities of tenant panels or equivalent groups and responding in a constructive and timely manner to them.*
- *the provision of timely and relevant performance information to support effective scrutiny by tenants of their landlord's performance in a form which registered providers seek to agree with their tenants. Such provision must include the publication of an annual report which should include information on repair and maintenance budgets.*
- *providing support to tenants to build their capacity to be more effectively involved.*
- *registered providers shall consult with tenants on the scope of local offers for service delivery. This shall include how performance will be monitored, reported to and scrutinised by tenants and arrangements for reviewing these on a periodic basis.*
- *where registered providers are proposing a change in landlord for one or more of their tenants or a significant change in their management arrangements, they shall consult with affected tenants in a fair, timely, appropriate and effective manner. Registered providers shall set out the proposals clearly and in an appropriate amount of detail and shall set out any actual or potential advantages and disadvantages (including costs) to tenants in the immediate and longer term. Registered providers must be able to demonstrate to affected tenants how they have taken the outcome of the consultation into account when reaching a decision.*



- *registered providers shall consult tenants at least once every three years on the best way of involving tenants in the governance and scrutiny of the organisation's housing management service.*

3 Tpas National Standards

The key principles that Tpas recommends a landlord should have in place to ensure effective scrutiny are:

- *There is a good relationship with senior management and the Council / Board and there is clarity about the role of scrutiny within the organisation and its governance arrangements.*
- *Work with the overall tenant engagement framework, thus holding the organisation to account through collaborative and supportive yet independent tenant led scrutiny.*
- *Constructively challenge on areas for improvements, using available and commissioned performance information.*
- *Identify what the organisation does well and celebrate this success.*
- *Drive business performance with a positive organisational approach to listening and acting on constructive challenge.*
- *Produce clearly identified and measured outcomes and impacts. (e.g. improvements to services, better value for money, increased transparency).*
- *Be valued (by Council or Board) as tenant led scrutiny provides research, insight and feedback direct from customers they may not get to hear.*
- *Be a key part of the business improvement process, and part of the self-assessment and value for money framework.*
- *Make sure that tenants have an influencing role that is proactive, evidenced based and leads to positive business improvements.*
- *Support the overall organisational approach to tenant engagement and empowerment.*

Tpas has produced a set of national standards that allows landlords to assess their own resident engagement against best practice across six main themes:

1. *Engagement Strategy; build the right foundations for effective engagement.*
2. *Resources for Engagement; Identify the right support to enable effective engagement.*
3. *Information and Insight; Commit to gathering, using and providing the right information.*



4. *Influence and Scrutiny; Create appropriate and effective levels of influence and scrutiny to drive business performance.*
5. *Community Engagement; Use a range of methods for effective wider community engagement.*
6. *Valuing Engagement; Measure the effects of your engagement so that it adds value to your organisation, stakeholders, communities and individuals.*

4 Options for Stevenage BC to deliver scrutiny

Formal Scrutiny

A Scrutiny Panel is the most commonly used arrangement in place by social landlords. It is resident-led and made up of up to ten tenants and leaseholders and supported by the landlord's staff. It will be formal in that it has Terms of Reference and Code of Conduct and will usually be part of the landlord's governance structure. This is important as it confers status and influence. Ideally, it will report directly into a Board or equivalent and be chaired by a resident.

The underlying ethos will be of co-regulation i.e. that residents and officers will work together in a collaborative way to scrutinise services and performance through Key Performance Indicators (KPI) and service reviews. The Panel will choose the areas it wishes to scrutinise. How service review choices are decided can be through a number of activities i.e. tenant call for action; performance dips; legal requirements to review; services about to go to procurement and board/officer request to review, but the final decision will rest with the Panel.

The Panel will request reports and information from officers. It will usually produce a scoping report to agree a timeframe, information required and which Panel members will be involved. The Chair may divide up tasks amongst Panel members to spread the workload and in some cases commission other involved structures within the organisation to carry out exercises that investigate how the service is currently delivered e.g. Mystery Shoppers/telephone survey calling. They may agree to meet less frequently during this period to concentrate on their tasks before agreeing the final report.

Reports may be chosen by Panel members through the studying of KPIs, formal complaints, feedback from residents, customer insight and profiling information or surveys such as STAR. Benchmarking is a clear part of scrutiny to draw on comparisons is one of the most effective things organisations can do to **improve their operations and address VFM.**

The report will have a series of recommendations and be agreed by the Panel and given to the landlord's officers to review. They will formally respond within a given timeframe



with their responses to each point. They will state whether they agree or not (giving a clear reason why not) on each recommendation, what action will be taken, which officer or department is responsible for actioning and a timeframe for completion. The landlord should provide regular updates on the progress including reasons for any deviation from the recommendations.

Recruitment to the Panel should be formalised by an application form to ensure that residents volunteer knowing the requirements of the role but it is important that there is a cross-section of residents reflecting tenure, diversity and geographical location. There should be some form of annual review of the Panel to assess its effectiveness and also for individual members to assess their contribution and address any training needs.

Training is important, particularly on the roles and responsibilities for members, how a Panel undertakes scrutiny, Chairing skills and working as part of a team. It may be useful to have a Board champion who takes responsibility for ensuring any top level issues are addressed and that the Panel and in particular the Chair are fully supported.

Most landlords will cover expenses for residents to attend panels and may make rewards such as vouchers or a Christmas meal in recognition of their efforts. Provision of IT equipment is also useful for those without their own resources

The landlord and Scrutiny Panel should work together to communicate information to all residents on the work they have been doing. This is to ensure hard to reach residents become aware of its work and also to encourage potential new members.

Tpas has produced a guide called “**Nine Steps to Scrutiny**” that highlights best practice in the sector for social landlords and how they can achieve the best outcomes from their scrutiny panels (see attached).

Pros of a formal scrutiny panel:

A panel has status and if properly constituted, supported and trained can have a real impact on the way an organisation responds to the voice of residents.

- Relatively cheap to run once initial set up costs have been factored in.
- Residents feel listened to and that they have influence on decisions being made.
- There is a good deal of best practice available nationally to help shape the best structure for each organisation.
- Less easy to assess value-for-money of a Panel.
- Compliant with the Tpas National Tenant Engagement Standards and the Regulator for Social Housing’s Tenant Involvement and Empowerment standard.



Cons of a formal scrutiny panel:

- Can be seen as a “talking shop” where residents achieve little in the way of outcomes.
- Some residents see them as not being independent of the landlord.
- Can be too formal for some residents.
- Can be reflective of a small number of like-minded residents.
- Often have a lack of diversity.
- Can exclude hard-to-reach residents.
- Often held in one location at times where working residents find it hard to attend.
- Residents need to fully understand the requirements of the role.
- Fatigue can set in if meetings or reviews too onerous or complex leading to a drop-off in numbers.
- Less easy to set up for a small landlord.
- Needs to be in addition to wider community engagement activities.

Task and Finish Groups

An alternative to a formal Scrutiny Panel is a Task and Finish Group (T&FG). These give residents the opportunity to improve services by giving views on a specific topic over a short period of time (usually up to three months).

The concept is similar but membership is more fluid and rather than have set meetings with a permanent membership, the landlord will choose a subject for review. This will be advertised or communicated to all residents or through targeted contact using complaints or those who have expressed an interest in getting involved.

Once the group has been selected or self-selected, they will agree responsibilities and a short timeframe. The review will be undertaken using mainly online tools and perhaps short onsite visits, for example on voids or estate management.

Pros of T&FG

- T&FG can be popular with residents who do not wish to commit to a long period of time that is usually associated with Scrutiny Panels.
- Do not suffer from meeting fatigue.
- Short timeframes usually mean good energy from the groups and quick outcomes.
- A number of reviews can be achieved in a short timeframe.
- They attract residents who have a particular interest or expertise in a subject.



- Can be useful for those less able to physically attend meetings by making good use of online facilities to carry out the work.
- They are cost effective.
- They attract a wider range of residents who are interested in reviewing the business of their landlord.
- Can suit smaller organisations.

Cons of T&FG

- Talented and experienced residents commit to a short-timeframe only which means a constant recruitment process is needed.
- Can have less influence corporately than a Scrutiny Panel if there is no direct link to Board/Committees.
- Can be harder to administrate with a constantly changing group of residents.
- Generally compliant with the Tpas and RSH standards but only if the outcomes of reviews are discussed, agreed and acted at a strategic level.
- Little chance of introducing benchmarking activities

Pop Ups

This form of engagement tends to be smaller, ad-hoc and local. It can be centred around an estate with a particular issue such as addressing concerns raised by residents on grounds maintenance, cleaning or parking.

The landlord can use this as a quick and effective way to tackle dissatisfaction by speaking directly with residents and contractors. It helps break down barriers and develop trust if the landlord acts quickly.

They can be a relaxed and fun way to engage with residents particularly if run with activities for children.

Pros of Pop Ups

- Quick and easy to set up.
- Addresses resident or staff concerns about housing issues at a local level.
- Staff can tack on other subjects to test resident views whilst they are in one location.
- Residents do not need to commit to more than a couple of hours of their time.
- Can be delivered at short notice.
- A landlord can cover a wide area of their housing stock quickly and easily



Cons of Pop Ups

- They only address small and specific topics in a locality.
- Can be difficult to obtain structured feedback if not properly managed.
- They can only form one part of an overall resident engagement strategy.
- Senior managers and/or Board may not be informed of results.
- Less easy for residents with disabilities to be involved.
- As a stand-alone form of engagement, they do not comply with the Tpas or RSH standards.

Bootcamps

Bootcamps are run along similar lines to T&F Groups but are usually run by an independent facilitator. The subjects of service for scrutiny are usually chosen through a survey of residents asking them to choose from a selection of topics. Those residents interested are asked to apply to be part of the event/s with an aim to achieve a diverse representation.

Topic events are held usually over two days with an online option available where possible to allow ideas and views to be expressed by residents unable to physically attend.

The first day usually consists of outlining the process looking at the identified key questions and receiving the presentations from relevant staff. The independent facilitator plays a key role in opening up discussion from residents and staff and encouraging less vocal residents to participate.

The second day is spent reviewing any additional data and the combined staff/resident groups work on recommendations and suggestions based on a series of questions. These recommendations are collated and then compiled into a report agreed by the residents. The report is then sent to the landlord's senior management team for review, comment and action and the residents informed of the report outcome including timeframe and responsible officers.

Pros of a Bootcamp

- They are cost effective in terms of resources needed.
- Reports are produced quickly and a number of reviews can be completed over a year
- Recruitment of residents is easier than formal groups because of the self selecting nature of the group.
- There is a better chance of a wider representation of residents in terms of diversity and geography.



- Residents are in control of the subjects for review.
- They are less formal and more interactive than Scrutiny Panels
- Provided the reports are presented and actioned at Board or SMT level, they are compliant with the Tpas and RSH standards.
- Facilitator can provide benchmarking examples

Cons of a Bootcamp

- They can be more work for officers to administer if the turnover of residents is high.
- They tend to suit simpler topics for reviews because of the shorter timeframe.

The Council held a very successful scrutiny bootcamp event looking at the Gas Service and the introduction of an MOT Service in January this year. The event was held at the Ibis hotel, with six members of staff and five CSP members in attendance to run the event and help facilitate table discussions. An invitation was sent out to all residents and approximately 50 tenants and ten leaseholders came to the event, many of whom had not been involved with the Council before.

The bootcamp consisted of two presentations, each followed by a table discussion, and a final session where each table put forward their top two recommendations for service improvements. These recommendations were discussed and either agreed or disagreed at the time. The flipchart paper from each table, with all of the recommendations from both discussions, were collected and later collated into a table. Attendees were informed that they would receive a copy of the table and would be able to see which recommendations had been agreed, who the responsible member of staff for each agreed recommendation was and the deadline for implementation of any agreed recommendations.

Organisations are changing the ways in which they work with their tenants to more task and finish / bootcamp approaches; one off focus groups; the use of social media platforms. Some organisations are establishing central databases of tenants who want to be involved. Taking this approach increases the likelihood of a more diverse group of tenants being involved, with a greater spread of experiences.

The organisations that have created a centralised database of interested volunteers have included gathering information around the following:-

- ✓ What service areas are volunteers interested in e.g repairs, leaseholders, asb, complaints etc
- ✓ Preferred methods for involvement e.g. scrutiny bootcamp events, on-line surveys, focus groups, tenant inspectors, mystery shoppers, one off meetings, questionnaires and surveys,
- ✓ Preferred methods of communication, face to face, on line, via telephone , text, meetings etc



This information can be gathered through a variety of means including:

- a questionnaire both on-line and paper;
- through front line staff asking them as part of their other meetings with people;
- in sheltered schemes through their wardens;
- through any calls to the organisation utilising a quick telephone survey to gather info through contact centre.

Staff could be given a target to get people onto the database.

This database can also be utilised to find out what the priorities are of the general tenant community and this intelligence can then be used to prioritise involvement work annually. This centralised database can also be used by the scrutiny framework to establish wider priorities for scrutiny reviews etc.

Moving to this type of model ensures that the organisation has a 'pool' of people willing to get involved in a lot of different ways. It's really important when talking to tenants and leaseholders and asking for this information that there is a consistent, clear and transparent message – it's about tenants getting involved in the ways that suit them and it's not all about face to face meetings.

Tenants on the database are then contacted as and when an opportunity develops. This approach has several benefits for organisations including:

Benefits

- It enables the organisation to consult a far wider and representative group of tenants and leaseholders for their views and getting involved
- It enables the organisation to target directly, those who may be interested in a particular area of concern / priorities
- A large proportion of involvement will be more task and finish type involvement rather than meetings for meetings sake.
- It is a more value for money approach to involvement that is targeted for both volunteers and the organisations needs

Alternative for Housing Management Advisory Board

The HMAB is a high-level forum made up of council tenants and leaseholders, Councillors and staff. They work with the Council's Executive and other committees and the HMAB acts in an advisory role on housing related decisions, considers housing related policy and strategic decisions along with regular scrutiny reviews. The Board's role is wide-ranging including development of strategies, budgets and business plans and reviewing KPIs.

The makeup is designed to reflect a cross section of decision makers and service users and provides a forum for important strategic decisions to be reviewed.

However, there are a number of aspects of this arrangement that may suggest an alternative is required. Set out below are the pros and cons for the HMAB.



Pros of the HMAB

- It represents a good cross-section of those involved in providing or receiving services from Stevenage BC.
- It has influence because of the Councillors who make up to five of the Board.
- The areas of review are high-level and business critical.
- It provides a formal link between the Council and residents.
- Residents will have a forum that can represent their views and opinions.

Cons of the HMAB

- There is a duplication of work of Customer Scrutiny Panel (CSP).
- There is a conflict of interest as Councillors sit on the HMAB and at full council therefore “mark their own work”.
- There is a conflict of interest as a member of CSP sits on the HMAB.
- The term of office up to eight years is too long for members.
- The quorum is set high and runs the risk of having meetings unable to complete the business set.
- The HMAB is burdensome for officers to administer in terms of paperwork, reports, agenda, minutes and attendance.
- It is likely to be costly in terms of staff time.
- It makes recommendations only rather than making decisions.
- It is unclear where the HMAB sits in the governance structure of Stevenage BC .

The HMAB has a role that appears to duplicate a number of the functions that would be expected to be carried out by the Council members and by officers. A more streamlined approach to decision making and scrutiny could be set up with the SMT having responsibility for the following:

- Business planning
- Budgets
- Investment in housing
- HRA
- Delivering of all housing services

This leaves Councillors to fulfil their primary role as overall decision makers giving a clear demarcation of responsibility.

There is still a role for the HMAB which could include:

- To take an independent view of Stevenage’s performance against agreed standards and targets and report to Full Council on a quarterly basis.



- To contribute to setting standards and targets as part of any reviews.
- To have regard to a range of information/sources (as appropriate) including, but not limited to:
 - Performance Indicators
 - Outcomes from Community Engagement activities
 - Tenants and Residents Associations
 - Satisfaction Surveys
 - Customer complaints
- To use an evidence-based approach to identify areas for resident scrutiny and commission this through Stevenage's scrutiny arrangements.
- To monitor the progress of scrutiny work against agreed timescales.
- To consider resident scrutiny findings and recommendations and agree these with the Portfolio Holder for Housing, the Housing Executive Team ahead of reporting to Full Council.

If there is a desire to do so, the HMAB could continue to work in a briefing and advisory capacity, but it is recommended that the frequency of monthly meetings is reduced significantly.

5 Recommendations

Scrutiny

- Following the success of the scrutiny bootcamp event in January, Tpas recommends that Stevenage BC continue to undertake service reviews in this manner and disbands the Customer Scrutiny Panel on completion of the Gas Contract review.
- Service areas for review through scrutiny bootcamps to be identified by the HMAB (see below).
- A minimum of two Borough wide scrutiny bootcamps should be held each year and could be complemented by community based activities (focus groups and pop-up events) and digital / on-line engagement (emails, surveys etc).

Housing Management Advisory Board (HMAB)

- Tpas recommends that the HMAB undertake the role as set out above.
- Tpas would recommend that the make-up of this group is 9 residents (tenants, shared owners and leaseholders) and 3 councillors. The membership should be limited to a maximum of 12 people.
 - The term of office for residents should be limited to 3 years, however members who step down at the end of their term of office may be re-selected, but should be considered alongside other suitable applicants through a fair and transparent appointment process.
 - The HMAB should be accountable to tenants and residents for the work it undertakes in carrying out performance review and commissioning scrutiny



bootcamps (two a year). It should be supported to do this through the SBC website, newsletters and social media.

- The HMAB should make a quarterly report to Full Council – this may prompt action and /or require a response. The HMAB will agree findings and recommendations from any scrutiny it has commissioned with the Portfolio Holder for Housing and the Housing Executive Team before presentation to Full Council.
- Assistant Directors for Housing, Investment and Repairs should attend the meetings to support then HMAB in its role, as and when required.

Leaseholder Involvement

- It was clear from the leaseholders that attended the Scrutiny Bootcamp event in January that they want to engage with Stevenage BC but may struggle to do so due to work or family commitments. Stevenage BC should consider a digital platform for leaseholders to improve leaseholder input and satisfaction.

Database of Involved Volunteers

- Stevenage BC should consider developing a database of resident volunteers that captures how residents would like to be involved and what service areas they are interested in.

Valuing Engagement

Stevenage BC needs to:

- look at how it can evidence that engagement is planned, monitored and measured and has clear aims, objectives and outcomes.
- work with stakeholders to track outcomes and evaluate achievements through engagement.
- involve tenants and communities in performance monitoring, learning from and improving performance through effective challenge.
- demonstrate that Engagement activities result in changes for the benefit of the organisation, tenants, leaseholders and communities
- develop an impact assessment approach to establish some of the benefits and impacts of their engagement activities. ‘You said you did’ approach is great to communicate achievements to a wider network of residents. You could also use Facebook, Twitter and other departmental communication channels.
- work with the Housing Management Advisory Board to set outcomes and measures each year – using quantitative and qualitative research
- consider when objective setting what is to be achieved and how the achievements will improve social, environmental and economic value - how to measure and evidence that your intervention has led to improvements. How to capture non -intervention improvements too?



Celebrating Engagement

- Promote engagement achievements through a variety of mechanisms to the wider resident base to aid recruitment – this could be in a communications plan with measurable actions that can be monitored – most volunteers give up if they cannot see clearly what has changed as a result of their involvement.

Communication & Feedback

- Whatever the resident engagement activity, Stevenage BC must be openly and honestly communicating with its residents and communities. They will want to know what has happened to the feedback, opinions and views they have given you
- We recommend that wherever there is a change in circumstances or a need to review services:
 - Robust engagement activities are carried out with those it affects. This could include fun-days, door knocking, Chip and Chat events, Focus Groups, Surveys etc.
 - Be clear as to why you are there and what you are looking for from those engaged.
 - Closing the loop of consultation by returning to say what has happened as a result, is essential in all activities to build and retain trust. Future activities and the view of Stevenage BC as a caring and listening organisation will be determined in these exchanges.
 - Be clear about activities and only engage when you have a clear objective or there is a specified need.

As Stevenage has had some success with a wider community-driven approach, it is hoped the recommendations within this report can be considered for their way forward in developing a more comprehensive resident involvement and scrutiny method that suits residents and the organisation.