

**Agenda No:**

**Report Title:** Resident Scrutiny Panel – Review of the ‘resident voice’

**Board:** Town & Country Housing (TCH) Board      **Action:** For consideration & approval

**Date of Meeting:** Thursday 15 July 2021

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**Presenters by video:** Tanya Young & Teresa Godden O’Callaghan (Resident scrutiny panel members)

**Documents in the Board Pad Reading Room:** Action plan (appendix one)

**Executive Summary**

Following their review of the resident voice (digital communication and service standards), the resident scrutiny panel have developed 41 service improvement recommendations. These are detailed in section five of this report and in the action plan (appendix one). The recommendations focus on improvements to the TCH & ‘Love Living Homes’ (LLH) websites, ‘My Home Online’ and service standards. All are aimed at ensuring that the ‘resident voice’ is better reflected throughout the business, including in resident communications.

**Recommendations**

TCH Board are kindly requested to consider the findings & recommendations detailed in section four & five of this report and in the action plan (appendix one). The action plan also contains the management response.

## **1. Introduction**

- 1.1 The resident scrutiny panel was established in October 2013 and is designed to fulfil TCH's commitment to enable residents to directly influence service provision, as well as exceed the Regulator of Social Housing's regulatory requirements. Since April 2014, the panel has undertaken nine service reviews of customer services, responsive repairs, the void standard, the grounds maintenance service, the money support service, responsive gas services, planned repairs & maintenance, leaseholder & shared owner services and service charges.
- 1.2 In late 2020, the panel commenced a review of the 'resident voice'. This was undertaken by resident scrutiny panel members: Francesca O'Neill, Emma Lovell, Yvonne Camille, Natalieann Leadbetter, Paul Evans, Teresa Godden O'Callaghan, Tanya Young, Chris Banwell, Valerie George and Kevin Dodds.
- 1.3 This will be followed by further recommendations for the third and final element of the review (staff recruitment, induction & training process) to TCH Board in late 2021. There is also the possibility that resident involvement in procurement processes will be included in the third and final element, with recommendations to TCH Board in the same timescale.

## **2. Rationale & aims**

- 2.1 Several of the panel's previous service reviews have made recommendations to improve elements of TCH's website and develop service standards. This recurring theme was the main catalyst to undertake a more comprehensive review of both and how the 'resident voice' is reflected in these important areas of the business. In addition, the 'resident voice' features prominently in the 'charter for social housing residents' (social housing white paper) published in November 2020 and will receive greater regulatory focus in future.

## **3. Methodology**

- 3.1 The review was undertaken using a structured process developed during previous service reviews. This included a desk top review of evidence and information, followed by a reality check phase culminating in several recommendations for service improvement.
- 3.2 The desk top review phase involved the gathering of relevant evidence and information. This was analysed and considered by the panel over several weeks and included the following:
  - Presentations and discussions with key staff members
  - An extensive exercise to compare the layout and presentation of the TCH and LLH websites, with the equivalents of 33 other registered providers/local authorities to identify innovation and good practice examples.
- 3.3 The activities outlined below were undertaken as part of the reality check phase. This enabled the panel to ascertain if the evidence and information gathered to date translated into actual service delivery. In addition, it provided an opportunity to clarify and affirm provisional findings resulting from the desk top review phase.

- In May 2021, a digital survey was emailed to approximately 6,000 tenants and approximately 900 shared owners & leaseholders to obtain feedback about the TCH and LLH websites. The panel received 108 tenant & 29 shared owners & leaseholder responses.
  - Alongside this, the resident scrutiny manager contacted a small number of residents by telephone on behalf of the panel, to obtain feedback about service standards. These residents were selected from recent satisfaction surveys responses, conducted by Kwest on behalf of TCH, based on feedback about processes and timescales.
- 3.4 In summary, approximately 60% of tenant survey respondents indicated they use a mobile device to access the TCH website, while 49% of shared owners & leaseholders said the same. A small number of tenants said they require an accessibility tool to use the website, however none were aware that the facility already exists. In the region of 49% of tenants and 48% of shared owners & leaseholders respondents said they would contact customer services if they could not locate the information they were seeking on the website. While many respondents did find they could navigate satisfactorily, consistent themes were expressed around the volume of clicks required to locate information, as well as the need to sift through information to find the answer to a query or not finding the answer at all. Other problems cited included the time taken to load pages, persistent and annoying pop ups and log in difficulties. In the region of 17% of shared owner & leaseholder respondents said that they did not use either website. The anonymised survey outcomes have since been shared with relevant teams who have also been asked to contact respondents if they raised a specific query and requested a response.

#### **4. Findings**

- 4.1 Firstly, the panel recognises the work that has already taken place to develop both TCH and LLH websites and feel that vast improvements have been made. They also acknowledge that there are currently limited staff resources to implement further improvements and given the number of recommendations, some may require outsourcing which will incur an additional cost.
- 4.2 The TCH website is the key information source for most residents with internet access, particularly since the coronavirus pandemic forced TCH away from face to face contact. Yet it remains confusing with information difficult to locate unless the user already has a good idea about what they are searching for in advance. The website does not lend itself well to general browsing.
- 4.3 A lot of information that residents seek may be available but with few menus, users are forced to use a search function which works on predetermined tags. Much of the content is presented as blog posts. These are presented in random order and in different sized panels and pick up each word entered into the search bar. There is also an inconsistent result across different types of devices (e.g. mobile compared to iPad).
- 4.4 In summary, this can make it challenging to find answers to basic questions. In these unprecedented times and with so much focus on digital communication generally, the panel strongly feel that clear and comprehensive information is paramount and significant improvements in this area could go a long way to improving customer satisfaction and reducing contact with the customer service team.

- 4.5 After extensively researching 33 other registered provider and local authority websites, it is clear that TCH could do more to ensure information is easy to find when using any digital device, utilise different methods of delivering messages, while taking into account a range of abilities and communication needs. The most notable example of a set of clear, accessible and measurable service standards are those of Hexagon Housing Association (provide link in Diligent).
- 4.6 The panel wish for TCH to provide more service specific and measurable service standards. These should be displayed in a concise format and in a prominent position on both websites. Resident feedback indicated that frustrations arise from a lack of communication, leading residents to feel left in the dark and conclude that TCH either does not care or does not listen to their concerns.

In most cases, residents are prepared to be patient if their queries take time to resolve, providing they are regularly kept up to date with progress. None of the residents canvassed on the telephone about service standards were familiar with the term or what it meant.

- 4.7 The recommendations below reflect these findings. As the review has focused on the 'resident voice' as opposed to a specific service area, some of the recommendations will require a cross departmental approach to implementation. They may also contain information for contextual purposes.

## **5. Recommendations**

### **TCH website**

1. Optimise the search function from the home page so information is easier to locate. Enable key phrases such as 'grounds maintenance' to be searched as opposed to separate word 'grounds' and 'maintenance'. Display results with pages before blogs hierarchically according to relevance, perhaps with pinned pages and with equal sized tiles. Redefine some 'tags' such as 'involvement' rather than 'involved' and 'antisocial behaviour' rather than 'ASB' to enable results to be displayed on popular search topics. Consider if a more intelligent search function could be utilised to filter results as shopping websites do. Search function currently displays as huge text. This should be reduced and the autocomplete function does not work.
2. Consider a more traditional website format where information is grouped into logical subheadings, either at the top or on the side of the home page. Without using the search function, is currently hard to locate information. Some residents locate information through google (e.g. TCH resident scrutiny) as can be more direct than trying to navigate the website.
3. Ensure there are clear lines of responsibility for updating website content. Each head of service should be responsible for reviewing their content every six months, overseen by the PR & Marketing Team.
4. Add more videos to explain information where possible and optimise the use of info graphics to overcome any language or literacy issues.

5. Ensure website functionality is consistently excellent across device platforms. Our research indicates that most residents view the website on their mobiles, yet mobile and tablet views appear different which can make finding information harder on one device when compared to the other.
6. Develop a pet permission request template and explain who permission should be sought from.
7. Display positive comments (case studies) under feedback and complaints section.
8. Consider replacing 'Browsealoud' with a more advanced accessibility option to allow users to hear audio description and to change the font e.g. 'Recite Me'. Also make this function much more prominent on the website than it is currently.
9. Include measurable timeframes within the customer service standard.
10. Consider including information in leaflets with page turning software rather than long lists and avoid the use of lots of information being only available to download from 'libraries'.
11. Include information about current ASB cases on the website (these are available in the AR but not on the pages).
12. Make the ASB page title clearer as sits under 'you and your neighbours' and can be hard to locate.
13. Include better information on the types of ASB and clear guidelines on reporting them, for instance when and how to keep logs and whether to speak to TCH or the council. Also include timeframes for when to expect a response like in the case of 'abuse and harassment'. Detail options for residents when neither police nor TCH can intervene. Consider including a diary/log template. Consider the use of the 'leave a card' technique so residents can let their neighbours know of their grievance without face to face confrontation. Explain the ASB process better in terms of triggers for re-opening or creating new cases, and what to expect from the community safety service.
14. Consider side menus, like a phone/address book and review contact information so residents can quickly ascertain who to call in an emergency. This information is there but it could be clearer and more succinct.
15. Improve information on pests, who to contact and who is responsible.
16. Include rent charges and how to pay them on the same page as these are currently split. Detail different ways to pay. Consider using a clickable photo icon or drop-down menu.
17. Consider including information about Countrywise Repairs Ltd undertaking repairs where residents are responsible for providing and purchasing the materials.

## LLH website

18. Include a search function. Enable key phrases such as 'grounds maintenance' to be searched as opposed to separate word 'grounds' and 'maintenance'. Display results with pages before blogs hierarchically according to relevance, perhaps with pinned pages and with equal size tiles. Replicate redefined 'tags' on TCH's website such as 'involvement' rather than 'involved' and 'antisocial behaviour' rather than 'ASB' to enable results to be displayed on popular search topics. Consider if a more intelligent search function could be utilised to filter results as shopping websites do. Use the magnifying glass symbol for the search function.
19. Ensure website functionality is consistently excellent across device platforms. Our research indicates that most residents view the website on their mobiles, yet mobile and tablet views appear different which can make finding information harder on one device when compared to the other.
20. Develop a pet permission request template and explain who permission should be sought from.
21. Enable easier navigation to the complaints section (currently sits under each of homeowner and tenants FAQs and directs to generic 'contact us' form). Display positive feedback (case studies) under this section as well.
22. Consider including 'Recite Me' to allow users to hear audio description and to change the font and ensure the function is prominently displayed.
23. Include a leaseholder & shared owner service standard and ensure this specifies measurable timeframes. Avoid use of the term 'service standard' as it is jargon and too technical. Instead use 'our/LLH's commitments to you', 'our/LLH's promises to you' or similar.
24. Consider including information in leaflets with page turning software rather than long lists, and avoid the use of lots of information which is only available to download from 'libraries'
25. The repairs contact form currently thanks users for submitting the form even if they have not done so. The form also appears to be used for everything. Consider developing a more specific one such as for ASB.
26. Include information on ASB under the homeowner section and not just the tenant section.
27. Include better information on the types of ASB and clear guidelines on reporting them, for instance when and how to keep logs and whether to speak to TCH or the council. Also include timeframes for when to expect a response like in the case of 'abuse and harassment'. Detail options for residents when neither police nor TCH can intervene. Consider including a diary/log template. Consider the use of the 'leave a card' technique so residents can let their neighbours know of their grievance without face to face confrontation. Explain the ASB process better in terms of triggers for re-opening or creating new cases, and what to expect from LLH when a case has been reported.

28. Improve pest information under the tenant section, who to contact and who is responsible. Also include this under the homeowner section.
29. Include more information on payment options under the homeowner section 'make a payment' and add this under the tenant section.
30. Include information on resident engagement opportunities.
31. Expand information on grounds maintenance.

### **My Home Online and the email newsletter**

32. Simplify the rent payment facility so it as quick and easy to use as possible.
33. Add stock condition information for residents to view.
34. Enable a tailored version for leaseholders & shared owners.
35. Explore if self-help videos (from the website) can be added into the repository when developed.
36. Explore if a resident feedback can be added for general feedback but also for specifics e.g. service charge statements will have some changes made to them in the future (because of the panel's previous review of service charges). When they go finally out, it would be useful to ask residents what they think and if they find the new layout more transparent and easier to understand.
37. Include more 'good news' stories in the email newsletter such as TCH achievements and the difference these have made to residents and local communities.

### **Service standards & local offers**

38. Avoid the use of the term 'local offers' on the website, in correspondence and in communications generally. It is confusing and sounds like a supermarket offer.
39. Develop simple and measurable service standards for all front-line services so residents know what to expect and can understand quickly if the service is being delivered or not. Display prominently on the TCH and LLH websites.
40. Consult with residents more widely about the content of service standards for specific services (where this is not already defined e.g. in an existing policy or procedure). Where this information contained in an existing policy or procedure, extract it into a service standard for easy access and display prominently on the TCH and LLH websites.
41. Avoid use of the term 'service standards' as it is jargon and too technical. Instead use 'our/TCH's commitments to you', 'our/TCH's promises to you' or similar.

## 6. Next steps

- 6.1 Before this report was submitted to TCH Board, it was submitted to the appropriate managers and executive management team for comment. The management response to each of the recommendations is included in the 'management response' column in the accompanying action plan (appendix one).
- 6.2 The panel requests that TCH Board considers the recommendations & proposed timescales and provides a formal response, detailing the process by which the approved recommendations will be implemented. The resident scrutiny panel constitution states that *'where recommendations are agreed by TCH Board, an action plan will be developed and implemented by the head of service. He/she will provide the panel with a progress update every six months. Where TCH Board does not agree with any of the panel's recommendations, the reasons will be explained in their formal response to the panel'*.
- 6.3 The approved recommendations will also be summarised and published on the TCH website and in the email newsletter to enable residents to understand the impact of the resident scrutiny panel on service improvement.
- 6.4 The panel wish to extend their sincere gratitude to Helen Charles, Stuart Ilsley, Hannah Woodcock and Kate McMullen for their flexibility, openness and positive approach to the resident scrutiny process.