

**Agenda No:**

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

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

**Date of Meeting:** Thursday 27 January 2022

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**Presenters:** Teresa Godden O’Callaghan (at the board meeting) and Alex Tuckwell (by pre-recorded video), resident scrutiny panel members  
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**Documents in the Board Pad Reading Room:** Action plan (appendix one)

**Executive Summary**

Following a review of the ‘resident voice’ (staff recruitment, induction and training and resident involvement in procurement), the resident scrutiny panel have developed 22 service improvement recommendations. These are detailed in section five of this report and in the action plan (appendix one).

**Recommendations**

The Board are kindly requested to consider the findings & recommendations detailed in section four and five of this report and in the action plan (appendix one). The action plan also contains the management response. Please note that a small number of recommendations require further discussion by Executive Management Team before they can be approved. These are **highlighted** in appendix one for ease of reference. The outcomes will be reported to Customer Services Committee in March 2022.

## **1. Introduction**

- 1.1 The resident scrutiny panel was established in October 2013 and is designed to fulfil Town & Country Housing's (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 ten service reviews of customer services, responsive repairs & maintenance, the void standard, the grounds maintenance service, the money support service, responsive gas services, planned repairs & maintenance, leaseholder & shared owner services, service charges and the 'resident voice' phase one (digital services and service standards).
- 1.2 In July 2021, the panel commenced a review of the 'resident voice' phase two. 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, Valerie George, Kevin Dodds, Adam Field, Alex Tuckwell, Lorraine Gettings and Andrew Palmer.
- 1.3 The panel recognises that we are living through exceptional times and that TCH remains in a recovery phase following the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic. They appreciate that several of their recommendations are aspirational and will require careful consideration, planning and resourcing before they can be fully realised and implemented. The human resources team are especially challenged at this time and the panel understand that the recruitment of staff to fill existing and new vacancies must be prioritised above all else.

## **2. Rationale & aims**

- 2.1 The 'resident voice' features prominently in TCH's corporate strategy 2021-24, the social housing white paper (charter for social housing residents) published in November 2020 and will receive greater regulatory focus in future. Likewise, the National Housing Federation's 'Together with Tenants' charter which TCH adopted in 2021. In addition, recent press about the social housing sector led the panel to consider social housing stigma and the potential tools that could be used to address this. The panel felt that the topic was too wide to cover in a single review, hence this report details the second phase and concludes their review of the 'resident voice'.

## **3. Methodology**

- 3.1 The service review was undertaken using a structured process developed during previous 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:
  - A presentation on both elements and discussions with key staff members including Bob Heapy, TCH Chief Executive
  - An extensive exercise to compare the documents and processes in place at TCH with those of 14 other registered providers to identify good practice examples.

3.3 The activities outlined below were undertaken as part of the reality check phase, it provided an opportunity to clarify and affirm provisional findings resulting from the desk top review phase.

- Interviews with a small number of staff who had recently joined TCH or changed roles to understand more about the recruitment and induction process across different teams
- A digital survey was sent to a random group of staff across the organisation to get feedback about their personal recruitment, induction and training experience at TCH and their understanding of the 'resident voice'. The panel received 33 responses from 19 departments
- A talk from BPHA about recruitment and what they are doing to tackle housing stigma across the social housing sector
- Training with TPAS about resident involvement in procurement.

Although all staff who responded to the digital survey were able to describe the term 'resident voice', several did not understand its meaning. In the region of 27% did not feel it impacted their day-to-day work, including members of the income and neighbourhood housing management teams.

#### **4. Findings**

- 4.1 Firstly, the panel acknowledges the wide variety of roles within TCH and that while some have day-to-day dealings with residents, many do not. They also appreciate the more limiting way that recruitment, induction and training have had to be delivered during the Covid-19 pandemic.
- 4.2 Although several compulsory and very worthwhile elements are included in the induction and ongoing training of staff, the panel would like to see the 'resident voice' feature more prominently and consistently, regardless of role. Likewise, it should also be a key feature in recruitment packs, along with information about TCH's values, its social purpose and obligations to residents.
- 4.3 The digital survey responses indicated that less than a quarter of staff were attracted to TCH because of its values, social purpose and desire to provide services to residents. In the region of 57% stated they had not received any training about the 'resident voice', either during induction or subsequently. Where roles are predominantly back office such as in finance, IT or HR, some respondents appeared to have little or no understanding of the topic.
- 4.4 The recommendations below reflect these findings. Given the review has focused on the overall theme of the 'resident voice' across the organisation, some of the recommendations will require a cross departmental approach for implementation. The recommendations may also contain some information for contextual purposes.

## 5. Recommendations

### 5.1 *Recruitment, induction and training*

1. Given the prominence of the 'resident voice' in TCH's corporate strategy and in the social housing white paper, re-iterate oversight of this important matter to a member of TCH's leadership team so in effect, they own the portfolio, including delivery of the panel's recommendations (where accepted).
2. Consider developing 'resident voice' champions. This could be a staff member from each team or department to cascade important information and updates to colleagues. The champions could meet quarterly or as often as needed and be chaired by the assigned member of TCH's leadership team as suggested above. This approach may also aid cross-department working across the organisation.
3. Provide more information about TCH's ethos and social purpose in job adverts and recruitment packs, including a video for the latter to include a section about residents.
4. Regardless of role, ensure all candidates are asked questions designed to test each of the below points and consider how the second and third points can be reflected in every person specification:
  - Motivation for applying to join TCH
  - Equality, diversity and inclusion
  - Awareness about TCH's residents, the importance of the 'resident voice' and social housing stigma.

It was suggested that scenarios may be useful to test the second and third points.

5. To assist with recruitment, develop a feature and/or video for the website about existing staff (with their consent), explaining what it means to work for TCH and to demonstrate the wide variety of roles.
6. Consider changing the weighting or scoring of interviews so that consistent emphasis is placed on values, as well as skills/knowledge. Perhaps 30/70? Specific skills and knowledge can be gained but values often cannot. For example, is it necessary to stipulate a minimum number of years housing experience for some roles or can more emphasis be placed on transferable skills and/or candidate aptitude and potential to learn?
7. Consider the use of a video for the induction of all staff to give greater insight into TCH's social purpose and to reduce negative perceptions about social housing.
8. Consider how TCH can wider advertise vacancies to residents who are digitally excluded, either through lack of skills or digital poverty.
9. Develop regular newsletter articles including short videos about staff and their roles e.g. a day in the life of a neighbourhood housing manager. This will help to demystify TCH for residents.

10. Include more equality, diversity and inclusion information on the TCH website and make it more prominent. In parallel, provide more explanation of TCH values and how they are linked.
11. Where they are not already, ensure written skills are consistently tested at interview for all roles and ongoing training is provided where a need is identified. These skills are very important and the current quality of written communications to residents can be variable. When a resident receives a letter with spelling or grammatical errors, it leaves an impression of carelessness.
12. Post Covid-19, consider holding occasional 'open house' type events where interested residents can visit Monson House to learn more about TCH and shadow front line services (e.g. customer services).
13. Consider if joint training can be delivered for staff and residents on matters that affect everyone such as equality, diversity and inclusion. This approach may also help tackle social housing stigma. Can a pilot/test session be organised?
14. Consider joining <https://www.noteverydisabilityisvisible.org.uk> or <https://hiddendisabilitiesstore.com/> to demonstrate the inclusive culture at TCH to residents and prospective employees.
15. Provide an ongoing dialogue about equality, diversity and inclusion for staff, possibly utilising staff briefings. The panel rated the existing digital training highly but would like to see more scenarios included, as well as an explanation about invisible disabilities, non-binary and reasonable adjustments. The training should also be made available to TCH contractors.
16. Ensure all staff have direct resident interface at least annually, including those who are employed in vital back-office functions. The panel do not wish to be prescriptive about how this is delivered but could be through community engagement, joint training, back-office staff shadowing their front-line colleagues or undertaking door knocking for a specific purpose.
17. Consider if a mechanism can be developed to swap life stories between staff and residents. The panel admires the concept of 'reverse mentoring'. Can a pilot be tried where a willing resident mentors a willing staff member? If successful, this could be a powerful tool to address social housing stigma and deliver cultural change.

### ***Procurement***

18. Review the procurement policy to include more detail about resident consultation arrangements.
19. Recruit a pool of residents who can participate in ad-hoc procurement evaluation panels as required, and/or consider development of a dedicated procurement panel. Give them in-house training (and consider offering the TPAS course - 'procurement and the role of customers'). Also deliver involvement in various ways to maximise accessibility.
20. Amend the 'Involved' page of TCH website to reflect the above.

21. Develop a mechanism through which specific feedback on past products can be gathered (e.g. from complaints, feedback, satisfaction surveys). The purpose is to identify components which would be a false economy to build into new contracts because of durability issues.
22. Re-evaluate the driver for involving residents in procurement and whether this could include indirect services where the impact on staff could have a knock-on effect on residents (e.g. digital reporting tools and ICT such PDAs).

## **6. Next steps**

- 6.1 Before this report was submitted to 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 the 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 the 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 the 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 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 Dan Bott and Bob Heapy, for their flexibility, openness and positive approach to the scrutiny process.