

Road to Improvement

West Lancashire Borough Council's Tenant Involvement Strategy

Introduction

West Lancashire Borough Councils Tenant Involvement Strategy sets out its commitment to involving tenants. We see tenant involvement as crucial to promoting accountability, providing valued feedback about services and improvement of those services. The past few months has seen a major change in our approach and structures – the next few months will be critical in terms of ensuring that change happens. We see tenant input and ownership of our approach as important with this consultation allowing tenants to contribute, shape and set the strategy. We will listen to tenants and act on that feedback. Our ambition is to involve more tenants, through different ways and with greater input into service delivery than before.

Executive Summary

West Lancashire BC values the contribution of tenants in helping improve services. We want more tenants to be involved and in more ways. We will ensure greater tenant input into how we deliver our services. We believe accountability to tenants for our services improves delivery of those services and will welcome and act on tenant feedback. We will let tenants know how their views are being used to influence service.

We will ensure tenants have a wide range of opportunities to be involved. This will include continued support for the Tenants and Residents Forum and Tenant and Resident Associations, the Armchair Army Tenant Reading Group, through Satisfaction Surveys, our Website Group Tenant and new Service Inspectors for voids and repairs. We will also receive and act on Comments, Compliments and Complaints from tenants. We will also start up Local Offer pilots allowing tenants to agree priorities for their community or service.

We will improve services. We will do this through working with tenants through 'tenant led' Service Improvement Groups, setting with tenants targets for service delivery, monitoring our performances and targeting areas of concern to tenants.

Tenants will scrutinise our policies, standards, delivery and complaints. We will do this through a Services Evaluation Group which will ensure that service standards are agreed with tenants, that we have Local Offers that oversees the Tenant Annual Report and deals with handling and learning from tenant complaints.

We will support tenants to carry out these roles. We will do this through guidance and support for tenants including training for tenants, the New Tenant Knowledge Circle, the creation of new Tenant Champions and the adoption of a Tenant Expenses policy so that tenants are not out of pocket.

We will ensure tenants contribute to our housing policies. This will include all major housing policies, tenant priorities for investment, ensure standards for consultation for changes to Sheltered Housing and Supporting People and our approach to equality and diversity covering all tenants.

We will carry out an Annual Review of how well we have worked with tenants. We will compare with other landlords, what difference tenants have made and how we might improve further.

We will communicate effectively with tenants. We want our information to be accessible and easily understood. We will review Home Front News, continue to develop the web page on tenant involvement, meet with all new tenants and publish a Tenant Involvement Handbook capturing all opportunities for tenants to be involved.

We will provide resources to support the above. We have introduced two new staff making three full time staff working with tenants. We will provide funding to support all involvement and training.

Exciting and Challenging Times

“It is not only tenants who are benefitting from their freedom to learn and have a voice in the way the Council serves the Borough, but councillors, officers and staff who are able to sit down with tenants and listen to their ideas, so learning, at first hand, what the Borough needs for improvement for all. New tenants will be given information on the ways they can be involved and will be able to speak to a member of the Tenant Involvement Team to discover the most interesting area for them. This is the *Road to Improvement* for your council and every person living in the Borough.”
Hazel Scully, Tenant Chair Communications, Involvement and Empowerment Service Improvement Group

The benefits of Tenant Involvement

There are great benefits to be had through tenant involvement and creating partnerships between tenants, staff and Elected members. Tenant involvement aims to improve services. By having tenants directly influencing, monitoring and scrutinising the service, the service delivered should meet tenants needs and increase tenant satisfaction. Tenants will feel listened to, valued and empowered. If the Council is delivering a good service that tenants are happy with, this should help to achieve Value for Money.

Vision and Values

West Lancashire BC’s Vision is “to put services first and to build a Borough second to none. Our aim is to make the best use of resources to deliver the best possible services”. To achieve this vision it has the following values:

- Puts residents and frontline services first
- Ensures local services offer the best possible value including embracing partnership as a way of securing greater value for money
- Provides local people with the information that they need to judge how well their council is serving them
- Is open and accountable in the way we make decisions
- Promotes equality of opportunity and values the diversity of our communities

This Tenant Involvement Strategy supports the Councils' Vision and Values and seeks to engage more tenants in the delivery of its services.

Tenant Involvement into this Strategy

Tenants have played a leading role in developing this Strategy. This has included developing the new approach to tenant scrutiny and tenant leadership of service improvement and review. Tenants also developed a series of tenant expectations that have helped shape this Strategy such as ensuring tenants and their contributions are valued by the Council and the quality of the service is improved. Tenants were also consulted on this strategy and the approach to consultation and their contributions captured.

Our approach

The Council is supporting tenants in their involvement in the way it delivers its services, taking into account all recommendations made by Tenant Groups set up for this purpose. The Tenants and Residents Forum and Tenant and Resident Associations continue to contribute to how the Council makes changes for the benefit of all tenants. An Annual Report will be published which will show both successes in services and those services which could be improved. We see our approach being in four key areas:

- Supporting our formal structures including the arrangements for tenant scrutiny and service improvement
- Providing support for all active tenants including using our innovative Tenant Knowledge Circle.
- Widening our approach to engaging tenants through less formal structures that allow tenants to choose how they want to be involved and on topics that are of interest to them.
- To support tenant input in those areas where the Council wants to gain tenant views and contributions into decision making.

Underpinning this will be an Annual Review looking at the impact of our approach, capturing where tenant views have made a vital impact and identifying priorities for future resources and activity.

Tenant Structures

West Lancashire BC has a long and deep working relationship with the Tenants and Residents Forum as the overall representative body for tenants in West Lancashire. We will continue to support the work of the Forum and consult them on all major plans and ensure their feedback is received by the Landlord Services Committee. To ensure the Forum contributes as fully as possible we will carry out a review into supporting the effectiveness of the Forum. Likewise we will continue to work and support Tenants and Residents Associations, including developing action plans, where tenants choose to set them up and ensure they have the opportunity in future to contribute to the development of Local Offers.

We have a tenant led Services Evaluation Group (SEG), supported by four tenant led Service Improvement Groups (SIGs) and some Task and Finish Groups. To ensure the work of these Groups is anchored in the Council they will make recommendations to the Landlord Services Committee, a Working Group of the Cabinet that includes both councillors and tenants.

West Lancashire BC will ensure that tenants involved in these structures have easily accessible information and intelligence about services and performance.

Services Evaluation Group

This is the main tenant scrutiny body and oversees the work of the Service Improvement Groups. The SEG membership was recruited through an open process and has agreed terms of reference. Its work programme will include:

- Monitoring handling of, and learning from complaints on a quarterly basis
- Contribute to the development of the Annual Report with members of all four SIGs and sign the Report off
- To ensure the different needs of tenants are understood and acted upon
- Contribute to a Neighbourhoods Policy
- To consider and agree the Local Offers process including redress if the Offers are not met.
- Ensure all standards set are agreed with tenants

There will be an independent Annual Review of the SEG and its effectiveness.

The Service Review SIG has a proactive role in reviewing, in depth, areas of West Lancashire BC strategic priorities and plans, housing policy, and service delivery.

The TSA Compliance SIG will consider compliance with the Regulatory Framework (The framework explains the five standards that the Council must meet and are monitored by the TSA) through monitoring progress on the Service Improvement Plan.

The Communications, Involvement and Empowerment SIG will look to ensure that

- this strategy is implemented and reviewed
- tenants are fully informed about service delivery
- that Local Offers are discussed and agreed with tenants

The Performance Management SIG will monitor all Performance data including the Service Improvement Plan. This will include:

- agreement of performance indicators such as repairs and maintenance
- comparisons with other similar landlords performance
- identifying areas for improvement

In addition there will be one Task and Finish Group focusing on value for money as well as other Task and Finish Groups commissioned by the SEG as needed with a clear purpose and timescale.

Council seeking Tenant Input

The Council will consult with tenants on the following:

- West Lancashire's approach to self-financing following April 2012 including tenant priorities for investment
- Asset Management Plan (the way the Council looks at how it invests in its properties and the environment)
- Service Standards for adaptations
- Redecorating Scheme
- Review of the Community Estate Walkabout Scheme
- Changes to the Sheltered Housing Service where proposed supporting people changes impact on tenants

Widening tenant involvement

Whilst we are proud of the contributions our tenants make through our formal structures we recognise that many tenants would prefer to make their contributions in many different ways. We will also look to make involvement enjoyable and offer the following opportunities for involvement:

- **Armchair Army**
The armchair army covers ways that tenants can get involved from the comfort of their own home.
- **Tenant Champions**
Tenant Champions will be recruited and supported to play a leading role in making the case for tenant involvement primarily with other tenants but also more widely.
- **Tenants Reading Group**

The Tenants Reading Group read leaflets, newsletters and other publications from the Housing Department to give their views on how well they are written, if they are interesting and if they give clear information. Publications which have been edited by the group will be given the "Tenant Approved Logo".

- **Satisfaction Surveys**

Completing surveys are the easiest way for tenants to let us know their views. These are carried out through post, telephone or email.

- **Comments, Compliments and Complaints**

This is a way to monitor areas which may need changes or improvement. These can come from tenants in a number of ways such as through post, telephone, face to face, web site or email

- **Website Group**

This group looks at the housing section on our website to help us develop and improve the information available to our tenants

We want to build on our early work on Local Offers which allow tenants, either in their neighbourhoods, or for a common service they receive, to develop agreed standards of service. We will invite TRAs to be part of Local Offer pilots. We will also look to recruit, train and support tenant inspectors to provide a tenant-eye view of services provided by the Council and report back through the SEG and SIGs. Again following tenant feedback we will start with Void and Repairs Inspections.

Opportunity for all tenants to be involved

We are committed to ensuring all tenants choose how they want to be involved and on topics that are of interest to them. This starts with understanding who our tenants are, including their ethnicity and age, allowing us to adapt our services to meet tenants' needs, and to consider the best ways to engage tenants. We will develop an Equality Action Plan that supports our approach to diversity. We will also develop specific approaches including informal approaches to work with tenants including working with local ethnic groups, disabled people and informal groups of young people. We will also work with tenants in outlying rural areas and look to see if tenants, including those in our sheltered schemes, could become Tenant Champions..

Support for Tenants

Any tenant who wishes to become involved will be offered support, training and guidance to ensure they feel confident and have the knowledge required to get involved in a level that suits their needs.

We will continue to carry out self skills audits with involved tenants to identify areas where training is required. Training is provided either in house by housing staff or by external trainers.

We know the importance of social housing policy, funding and regulation and will continue to develop a training programme to build tenants understanding so they can contribute to discussion, debates and decisions. .

To help tenants understand how the Council operates, we are piloting our Training Academy, the “Tenant Knowledge Circle”. This will be an intensive training programme delivered by WLBC staff over a number of weeks. Tenants will take part in all sessions of the course and at the end will graduate from the Academy with a certificate and a greater knowledge of housing and the service offered by the Division. A graduation ceremony event will be held each year as part of the tenants’ conference, where tenants will be presented with their certificates.

To help to remove some of the barriers that prevent tenants from getting involved, we will develop and implement an out of pocket expenses policy.

Successful partnership working within the Council is key to delivery of this strategy. We will work with both staff and councillors to support their changing and evolving role. Staff Tenant Involvement Champions will promote Tenant involvement in all areas of the Division. A Tenant Involvement Toolkit has been developed for staff. This explains the tenant involvement structure and the benefits that working in partnership with tenants can bring to the service. By having this information, all staff are aware of the ways that tenants can take part and can actively encourage more tenants to be involved. . This is supported by on going training for staff.

Councillors have full responsibility for ensuring standards are met and maintained and we will develop an approach supporting leading councillors on their roles.

Publicity

Our objective is to ensure tenants are aware of the Involvement Strategy and the opportunities available to them.

We will prepare a fuller Communications Strategy, working with the Communications, Involvement and Empowerment SIG that seeks to ensure information to tenants is accessible and understood.

We will also celebrate success of tenants in contributing to improved service delivery by promoting a “you said, we did” approach. This will show other tenants how tenants have influenced and changed services. Home Front News is the tenants’ newsletter which is sent to all tenants 3 times a year and will be used to inform tenants of the strategy and encourage tenants to get involved. We will be carrying out a review on what tenants think about Home Front News and the information it contains.

The Council's website has a dedicated page on tenant involvement, which is updated regularly to ensure the information is relevant and up to date.

A tenant involvement Handbook is being developed which will be available for tenants. This details how tenants can get involved, what the benefits are for tenants, what support and guidance is available, and information about the Tenant Involvement Team.

A postcard outlining the way tenants can take part will be given to tenants by staff and contractors during home visits. Tenants completing the card can return it freepost. Tenants who indicate an interest will then be sent a copy of the Handbook and contacted by a member of the Tenant Involvement Team.

All tenants are given information on tenant involvement when they become a tenant, including the post card. Following on from this, every 3 months the Tenant Involvement Team contacts new tenants reminding them of the options available and including a Tenants and Residents' Forum membership form..

Resources including money

To support the increased emphasis on tenant involvement set out in this Strategy we will recruit two additional staff within the Tenant Involvement Team.

There is a budget in place to support all of the actions relating to tenant involvement. This will enable tenants to be supported in the process. We will review handling of the budget to develop accountability to tenants for expenditure against the budget.