

# TALISMAN

## TERMS OF REFERENCE

### Introduction

The purpose of **TALISMAN** is to ensure the needs and views of Gateshead residents are at the heart of how services are developed and delivered by The Gateshead Housing Company and Gateshead Council.

The three primary aims of the group are to:

- Act as an independent driver for continuous improvement in performance and value for money.
- Ensure that customer views and aspirations are central to improving performance and service delivery.
- To contribute to local and national consultations on policy and strategy issues affecting Gateshead

These three aims should be achieved by working together with The Gateshead Housing Company and Gateshead Council in a constructive and positive partnership.

### Remit

The remit of **TALISMAN** is to scrutinise services and approaches to ensure that The Gateshead Housing Company and Gateshead Council housing services are providing the best possible products and services to customers and to ensure that decisions have been made with customer needs at heart.

The scope of this scrutiny activity will be limited to the delivery of services provided by The Gateshead Housing Company and housing services at Gateshead Council in relation to the regulatory framework for social housing, covering:

- **Tenant Involvement and Empowerment** (customer service, tenant involvement, accessing services and responding to people's individual needs)
- **Home** (maintaining properties, repairs and maintenance and the health and safety of tenants and leaseholders)
- **Tenancy** (how properties are allocated and tenancy agreements, but not how rents are set)
- **Neighbourhood and Community** (keeping neighbourhoods clean and safe and addressing antisocial behaviour)
- **Value for Money** (how resources are managed and services being delivered in a cost effective but high quality way)

The remit is galvanised around a number core standards:

- To be engage and communicate with the wider customer body
- To act with transparency
- To reflect the needs and aspirations of the customer body

- To respect the primacy of The Gateshead Housing Company Board and the Gateshead Council Cabinet
- To make recommendations based on robust evidence, in a constructive and non-confrontational manner
- To highlight good practice

## Safeguards

Given the status, strategic importance and profile of **TALISMAN** it requires a high degree of probity. Safeguards to ensure this is maintained include:

- The development of a team and person specifications and sets of standard competencies.
- Adoption of an enforceable Code of Conduct.
- Use of a suitably qualified mentor to assist operations and assess collective and individual competence.
- A requirement for members to commit to undergoing training and ongoing personal development.
- Regular personal development reviews for members carried out by the Chair and or mentor, with time bound personal development action plans as required.
- A requirement that individual members declare any conflicts of interest in particular scrutiny reviews and agree to be excluded when any conflict of interest occurs.
- A requirement that the group publishes details of its scrutiny activities along with an explanation for the choice of topics, the priority allocated to them, the findings and resulting outcomes.
- An annual review of the group's effectiveness carried out by another customer group or staff.
- Ability for The Gateshead Housing Company Board to initiate a full external scrutiny of the **TALISMAN** and instigate appropriate sanctions such as issue of a 'Notice to Improve'.

## Scope

**TALISMAN** will be furnished with a range of powers and responsibilities, on the following basis:

- Full and unfettered access to internal performance data, comparative benchmarking data and customer feedback by submission of a 'Request for Information'.
- Commercially sensitive and personal data will not be shared with the group but the group can expect a full explanation of the reasons for confidentiality.
- Ability to commission independent evidence gathering activities through utilisation of the Service Improvement Groups, Mystery Shoppers and other sources.
- Ability to hear evidence from officers and customers on request.
- Ability to shadow officers in their duties on request (where there are no health and safety implications preventing this).

- Requirement to report on activities and account for prioritising, methods and recommendations.
- The power to report findings and recommendations directly to Boards without staff intervention.
- A formal duty on the Customer and Communities Committee and Executive Team to respond appropriately and in a timely manner to the group's requests and recommendations.
- A requirement that the Customer and Communities Committee and Executive Team develop and implement an Improvement Plan agreed jointly with **TALISMAN**.
- A formal 'Notice to Act' served on The Gateshead Housing Company Board where the Board or a subsidiary Committee has not responded within agreed timescales.
- Request for intervention by Gateshead Council where internal negotiations have broken down and The Gateshead Housing Company Board has not responded to the 'Notice to Act'.
- Request for intervention by the housing regulator where internal negotiations have broken down and The Gateshead Housing Company Board and Gateshead Council has not responded to the 'Notice to Act'.

## Communication and Engagement

A key objective of **TALISMAN** is to ensure it achieves a high degree of communication to the wider customer body. This is facilitated by adoption of the following measures:

- A requirement that **TALISMAN** publishes an annual report of activity and findings (as described earlier), including resulting outcomes.
- A requirement that **TALISMAN** publishes interim updates on its activity.
- A requirement that the results of **TALISMAN**'s annual health check is published to demonstrate that it is operating effectively.

This may be done through existing communication tools from The Gateshead Housing Company and Gateshead Council, or local community publications and websites.

## Scheduling Activities

- The Gateshead Housing Company will provide regular updates to the group to assist them in picking scrutiny topics. This will include performance indicators, customer feedback trends, and schedules of internal service reviews.
- The group will aim to complete between 2 and 4 scrutiny reviews per year and may do these as a full team or in smaller working parties, taking into account any potential conflicts of interest.

## Membership

- The group will be made up of a team of up to 11 volunteers who are selected based on an agreed competency framework and using a transparent recruitment structure.

- Up to 5 of those posts will come from the 5 neighbourhood management areas in the Borough, 1 from each area.
- The remaining posts will come from members of the Service Improvement Groups.
- To qualify for selection an applicant would need to be either a tenant, living with a tenant, or a leaseholder, and must be motivated in improving housing and neighbourhood services for the good of all and not for personal gain.
- Members will be recruited using a 3 stage recruitment process including a self-selection questionnaire, assessment activities, and an interview by a panel which includes at least one person who isn't a member of staff from The Gateshead Housing Company or Gateshead Council.
- The group will have the power to co-opt an additional 3 members as and when required for short periods to assist with particular scrutiny reviews or under-representation.
- The group will elect a Chairperson on an annual basis with a Chairperson able to stand for a maximum of 2 years.
- Members will be able to remain as a member of the group for an initial period of up to 3 years. A rolling cycle of retirement and recruitment will be carried out to enable continuity. This may include a voluntary or random selection to step down from the role. To facilitate this, members will be able to stand for a period of an additional 3 years if required to maintain this continuity.
- A member who has served for a full 3 year period must step down for at least 12 months before re-applying.
- Individuals who are currently serving as, or have been a Councillor or Board or Committee Member in the last 2 years, will not be eligible for **TALISMAN**.
- Individuals who are currently, or have in the last 2 years, been an employee of The Gateshead Housing Company, will not be eligible.
- Individuals who are currently, or have in the last 2 years, been an employee of Gateshead Council within a service covered under the remit of **TALISMAN**, will not be eligible.

## Resignations from TALISMAN

- Resignations from the Panel must be made in writing to the Chair (by letter or email) who will then inform the rest of the Panel. The Panel will then consider the resignation at the next ordinary meeting of the Panel.

## Support from The Gateshead Housing Company and Gateshead Council

The Gateshead Housing Company and Gateshead Council will provide **TALISMAN** with range of resources and support to enable them to carry out their role. This will include:

- Access to training and networking events to support personal development action plans
- Space to meet together individually and as a team
- ICT resources to carry out scrutiny work independently, including access to laptops and the internet

- Reasonable personal expenses to cover travel and consumables required as part of conducting scrutiny activities
- Access to customer involvement mechanisms to conduct research and gather supporting evidence
- Full access to information to carry out thorough scrutiny reviews within the timescales outlined in the request for information procedure.
- A budget to cover the operational costs of the scrutiny group which will be administered by staff but shared transparently with the group