

HOUSING SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

HOUSING COMMUNICATIONS SCRUTINY REVIEW

Notes from the resident focus group held on 1 November 2017

A resident focus group was held on 1 November 2017. The session was attended by six residents from the Housing Service's resident scrutiny panels, Cllr Mick O'Sullivan, Rose-Marie McDonald, Dean Donaghey, the Deputy Head of Communications and Change, and the committee clerk.

A number of points were made which were relevant to the committee's review, as follows:

- Residents identified joined-up working between teams and departments as a priority. It was commented that it was frustrating to be given different information from different officers, and having to repeat yourself to different teams. It was suggested that Housing Services should follow up issues and report back to residents, rather than residents having to chase services for progress updates.
- It was commented that join-up between Housing and Adult Social Services was very important for vulnerable tenants. It was suggested that vulnerable people may have difficulty managing their tenancy and social workers should provide information to housing to enable them to be better supported.
- It was suggested that residents raising issues such as repairs, complaints, nuisances, and so on should be given a single point of contact. Residents preferred to speak to the same officer and build a relationship with them, rather than deal with a different officer each time.
- Residents would welcome information on contact information for different departments. It was reported that residents did not know who to contact about different issues.
- The residents present thought that email was the most effective way to get a response from the council, as this provided a record of the communication. There was a concern that there was no record of issues raised by telephone.
- It was suggested that information on notice boards about forthcoming public meetings would be useful.
- Although the electronic notice boards on estates were welcomed, residents reported that there had been issues with these, including the boards moving too slowly and some notice boards not working. It was suggested that interactive notice boards would be a positive development.
- Residents said that most members of staff were polite and helpful, however some members of staff could be more sympathetic to their issues.
- A resident gave an example of poor service. He said that officers had put the phone down on him several times when reporting a repair. He had submitted a complaint to the council.
- Residents thought that communication around important issues could be improved. An example was given of water leaking into a property from the property above. It was commented that this issue had been ongoing for some time and it appeared that no progress was being made. The resident was regularly calling the council to try and progress the matter. Residents thought that the council should explain their processes, explain any delays, and keep them informed of progress.

- Residents raised issues of repairs being delayed without explanation. An example was circulated of a resident chasing a repair by email from July to October with no progress update given. The resident said she felt like giving up pursuing the issue, which related to water dripping into her flat.
- It was suggested that notices should be put up to communicate important information in communal areas. An example was given of a lift that regularly broke down. The contractor fixing the lift explained to a resident that it was because the door was being held open and this damaged an internal mechanism. The resident had suggested to a housing officer that a notice should be put on the lift doors explaining the issue, but was told that they couldn't put up a notice as it cost money.
- Residents highlighted issues associated with Partners for Improvement in Islington, commenting that some residents did not understand what was a Partners responsibility and what was a council responsibility.
- Residents highlighted issues with major works being carried out by sub-contractors. They felt that they did not know who was responsible for works being carried out to their properties, or who to contact when there were problems.
- Residents thought that there should be more openness and transparency around how decisions are made on major works. It was suggested that more communication was needed on the reasons why works were being carried out. It was also suggested that communications on major works should use simple language.
- It was commented that tenants and leaseholders attended separate consultation meetings when the scope of major works was being developed; the residents present understood the reasons for this, but felt that the separate sessions divided people. Both leaseholders and tenants thought that their views were being treated differently to each other.
- A leaseholder said that pursuing a claim as a leaseholder was a particularly onerous process and communication around this could be improved.
- Residents were supportive of the council using new communication channels, particularly text messaging.
- The residents present identified their top communication priorities as:
 - Having a named officer they can contact about their issue;
 - More joined-up services;
 - Receiving courtesy calls, and not having to chase the progress of repairs and other issues;
 - The council should communicate with residents through their preferred communications channel;
 - The website should only have up to date information.

Notes from the staff focus group held on 6 November 2017

A staff focus group was held on 6 November 2017. The session was attended by officers from a number of frontline housing services, including the Customer Service Team (which deals with complaints), Housing Direct (which receives requests for repairs), the Anti-Social Behaviour Team, the Revenue Control team (which deals with rent arrears), the Home Ownership Team, and the Tenancy Management Team (whose officers are based in area housing offices); Cllr Mick O'Sullivan, Dean Donaghey, the Deputy Head of Communications and Change, and the committee clerk.

A number of points were made which were relevant to the committee's review, as follows:

- Officers commented that the council website could be improved. They reported that both residents and officers could find it difficult to navigate, and sometimes the website included out of date information which led to residents having different expectations of council services. It was suggested that there should be more robust mechanisms for officers to report any inaccuracies or issues they have.
- A number of the staff members present had recently been appointed as 'service ambassadors'. It was suggested that service ambassadors could be appointed to review communication across departments and work through any issues.
- An officer commented that residents and officers found it frustrating when the council did not take a consistent approach. Complex issues which required several different teams to communicate with residents sometimes resulted in confusion.
- An example was given of the Repairs Access Procedure. This was the procedure to be followed when it was necessary to access a property to complete a repair that was causing damage to a neighbouring property. A common example of this was a leak from a property above dripping into a property below. It was explained that this was not a straightforward issue, only a judge could grant the council entry into a property without the tenant or leaseholder's permission, and this process was lengthy. The council had to demonstrate that it had repeatedly tried to contact the tenant or leaseholder without response. It was commented that complaints related to this sometimes focused on residents receiving different information from Repairs and Tenancy teams.
- It was advised that traditionally the Tenancy team had carried out a mediation or advocacy role on complex issues such as access and complex repairs; mediating between Repairs and the resident, and between residents, even if one was a leaseholder. It was suggested that this role was implemented because the Tenancy team were known to be experienced at dealing with complex complaints, however tenancy officers felt that it was not an efficient use of their time to pass messages between residents and other housing services. It was suggested that this process could be frustrating to both officers and residents.
- It was suggested that the council could arrange training days focused around specific complex issues and have staff attend from all services involved. This would ensure that all services understood their responsibilities, the responsibilities of other services, and the processes that should be followed. It was suggested that leaks from neighbouring properties and damp/condensation were complex issues that needed a more coordinated response.
- Officers dealing with complaints said it was preferential to be contacted by email rather than by phone. This was because an email allowed a resident to include all

necessary information, attach images, and so on. Often officers would need to call back residents who complained via telephone, as they did not have all of the relevant information to progress their complaint.

- It was suggested that residents wanted their complaint or issue to be acknowledged within 24 hours. However, officers advised that customer service advisors could take up to three days to log and begin processing a complaint submitted online. It was suggested that some teams responded to complaints faster than others.
- It was suggested that the council should advertise when it offered a flexible service. For example, the repairs service offered appointments between 12noon and 3pm to parents of school-age children, however it was suggested that many people did not know about this.
- Committee members suggested that services should not be afraid to promote the positive work they are doing. It was thought that when the council provided a good service this should be recognised and communicated.
- Officers thought that the council could make better use of record management systems. Some officers used CRM, the council's customer record management system. This allowed all council officers to make notes of their correspondence with residents. However, it was explained that not all services used the system, and the system had limitations. For example, it did not interact with the repairs system.
- Officers confirmed that they had attended various training sessions related to communication, including 'Make Every Contact Count', mental health awareness, and safeguarding. It was also advised that department specific training sessions were available, including negotiation skills, letter writing, and telephone manner.
- Officers advised that customer services issues should be addressed in one-to-one supervision meetings with their line manager.
- Officers said that they were motivated to provide a good service and were frustrated when things did not go well.
- It was suggested that the council could make better use of mailings to residents, such as the annual rent statement. For example, the reverse side of letters could include 'hints and tips' for maintaining their property or managing their tenancy, other useful information. It was thought that this would fit the council's early intervention agenda.
- It was not usually a problem if leaseholders let their property to private tenants, however it was important to have contact details for leaseholders on file. Most leaseholders who let their properties were responsible landlords, however issues could arise when the council had to communicate with management agents who would not pass on important messages to leaseholders. An example was given of management agents not supporting the council on tackling anti-social behaviour.
- It was advised that Housing Direct took service levels very seriously. All telephone calls were recorded. The council had commissioned Kwest to undertake independent satisfaction surveys for all repairs carried out, and management listened back to any calls if it was suggested that the response from the council was poor.