

TITLE OF REPORT: TALISMAN (Tenant and Leaseholder Independent Scrutiny Management) Panel – Progress Update

REPORT OF: Managing Director, The Gateshead Housing Company

Summary

The purpose of this report is to provide an annual update on the progress of the TALISMAN (Tenant and Leaseholder Independent Scrutiny Management) Panel

Background

1. The Tenant and Leasehold Independent Scrutiny Management (TALISMAN) panel was formed in October 2011. This followed an extensive project that considered the opportunities for the development of an independent tenants' organisation in Gateshead.
2. The purpose of the panel is to ensure that the needs and views of Gateshead residents are at the heart of how housing services are developed and delivered by The Gateshead Housing Company and Gateshead Council.
3. TALISMAN have a range of tools available to help them to effectively scrutinise a service area, which could include but are not limited to: -
 - Self assessment from Service Manager (written or in person)
 - Question and answer sessions with managers
 - Focus groups of employees or customers
 - Performance information including service standards and benchmarking information where appropriate
 - Feedback from surveys
 - Outcomes from mystery shopping
 - Co-opting of experts
 - Benchmarking or external learning to compare TGHC performance to other similar providers
4. The committee has, as part of previous update reports, received details of the findings from the following reviews that TALISMAN have carried out: -
 - Anti-social behaviour case management
 - Rent and income
 - Void management

Review of Customer Services

5. TALISMAN completed their fourth review and presented their findings to the TGHC Customers and Communities Committee in May 2015.
6. The fourth area selected for the Panel to scrutinise was customer service, specifically focusing its review on the housing office network.
7. A range of evidence was used during the course of the review including: -
 - Presentation from TGHC Involvement and Diversity Manager on overall customer service and Central Housing Manager on the local housing network.
 - Visit to each of the local offices to observe customer service
 - Focus Group with TGHC Housing Management Assistants
 - Board reports from previous housing office reviews
 - Results of mystery shopping of customer service carried out in August and November 2014.
8. TALISMAN identified a range of positive practice in their review of customer service covering: -
 - Cleanliness and tidiness of housing offices and how warm and friendly staff were to customers.
 - The website was very accessible to all customers and was clear and easy to understand.
 - The Wednesday Briefings with employees at local offices were very successful. Particular reference was made to one manager who held a quiz with staff to keep them up to date and encourage greater interaction. The Panel recommended that this was introduced by housing managers across the borough and that future briefings were delivered in a similar way.
 - Housing managers meet regularly with staff to discuss certain topics and feel able to help each other.
 - All Housing Managers had previously been Housing Management Assistants or Estate Officers and therefore understood these roles and the challenges that their offices faced.
9. The review identified 18 recommendations, a number of which could be implemented immediately. These included: -
 - Documents have been changed or deleted from the sign up procedure to reduce duplication.
 - Training on Conflict Resolution and Housing Benefit Verification has been provided and further sessions are planned.
 - Housing Management Assistants have been provided with the opportunity to shadow the Lettings Team.
 - Free phone signage in each housing office has been updated and renewed.
10. Other recommendations were identified as requiring longer to implement and target dates for completion were set. These included: -

- Reviewing of sign up procedure as part of a wider review of the allocation process.
- Updating of TGHC procedures and locating documentation in one central location.

11. Overall, the Panel thanked all employees involved in this scrutiny review.
12. The findings have been included within improvement plans for the service and progress against the actions has been reported back to both TALISMAN and Customers and Communities Committee.
13. The outcomes of the review have been publicised on the TGHC website.

Review of Lettings – Hard to Let Properties

14. The Panel is currently carrying out its fifth area of scrutiny around the lettings service and is specifically focusing on hard to let properties.
15. The Panel has used a range of evidence during the review including the following: -
 - Presentation from TGHC and Council Lettings Managers on overall lettings service and TGHC Head of Customer Services on hard to let properties
 - Review of Tyne and Wear Homes Website
 - Satisfaction survey results of Tyne and Wear Homes
 - Site visits to five hard to let properties (one in each neighbourhood)
 - Focus group with Housing Management Assistants and Lettings Officers
16. The Panel has completed this review and is currently pulling together its final report which it will present to TGHC Customers and Communities Committee in May 2016.

Recruitment and development of TALISMAN members

17. As of March 2016, there are seven members on the Panel.
18. The Panel continues to actively look to recruit new members and has had articles published in TGHC News during the last year.
19. The Panel has designed a more user-friendly leaflet and to generally look at better ways of raising the profile of TALISMAN. This is currently being produced.
20. The Panel now has its own banner to take to local events and had a stand at the Gateshead World Mental Health Day in October 2015 at the St Edmunds Church and Trinity Community Centre and at a community event at Springwell Community Centre on 10 August 2015.

21. Members of TALISMAN have attended a few events during the last year which have enabled them to network with other scrutiny panels and to develop their skills and knowledge. These have included three two day tenants Futures events in Chester.
22. In addition, members of TALISMAN attended the fifth Northern Housing Consortium Annual Tenant Panel Conference in November 2015 at York Racecourse.
23. The Panel has set up its own Facebook page which it uses to provide details of the reviews they are currently carrying out and events they have attended. The Panel has also recently set up its own Twitter account.
24. Members of the Panel continue to use a dedicated secure website for TALISMAN to share and discuss information during reviews.

Next steps

25. TALISMAN has completed its review of hard to let properties and is currently pulling together its final report which it will present to TGHC Customers and Communities Committee in May 2016.
26. TALISMAN has drawn up a shortlist of five potential areas for its next scrutiny review. It will agree which area it wants to focus on at its next meeting in April.
27. Members of TALISMAN will continue to receive a six monthly development review with the Independent Mentor. The reviews also provide an opportunity to identify any collective and individual training needs.
28. The Panel continues to develop and it is expected that this will evolve further during the next year.

Recommendation

29. It is recommended that the OSC note the progress of the TALISMAN panel with further annual progress reports being brought back to the OSC in order to scrutinise the effectiveness of co-regulation.