



TENANT ENGAGEMENT EXPERTS

tpas

Successful Scrutiny for Council Tenants

A research report for Tpas by Dr Dave Mckenna

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1. Summary

The purpose of this report is to help support council tenant scrutiny in England. While there has been a lot of attention on scrutiny for housing associations, we believe there is a gap when it comes to councils.

We hope this report will start to fill this gap by:

- Sharing successes of council tenant scrutiny
- Showing the benefits of tenant scrutiny for both landlord and tenant
- Highlighting what helps to make council tenant scrutiny successful
- Sharing advice from tenants, councillors, officers and national experts

This report draws on 19 interviews including with national experts and people directly involved with four local case studies. Interviewees include tenants, councillors, participation officers and housing managers.

The four case studies are:

- Hull City Council
- London Borough of Croydon
- North West Leicestershire District Council
- Swindon Borough Council

Scrutiny for council tenants is similar in many ways to scrutiny for those in housing association homes and is required by the regulations in the same way. There are some important differences, however, including size, decision making and organisational culture. While many of the issues for council tenant scrutiny will be the same as they are for housing associations, this research aims to provide ideas and advice that we know will work in the context of local councils.

The research found five big benefits of council tenant scrutiny, for the organisation and for tenants. These are:

1. Improved services for tenants
2. Better value for money
3. Stronger relationship between the council and tenants
4. Enhanced information and communication
5. An opportunity for tenants to develop

From the case studies we have identified ten helpful factors for embedding tenant scrutiny in councils - we have called these the keys to success.



Keys to success

1. Learning and development

Tenants have the knowledge skills and confidence they need

2. Support and resources

Tenants have what they need to be effective and aren't out of pocket

3. Relationships and respect

Trust and mutual appreciation help to ensure a constructive relationship

4. Organisational culture

All officers are responsive to tenants and the organisation is committed to tenant engagement

5. Role and recognition

Scrutiny has a clear and understood role in the decision-making structures for housing

6. Scrutiny process

A consistent and robust approach is in place for in-depth scrutiny work

7. Senior buy-in

A supportive and positive culture is led from the top

8. Access to information

Tenants have the information they need to pick topics and reach conclusions

9. Recruiting and retaining

Processes are in place to help find and appoint new members who are the right fit for tenant scrutiny

10. Keeping in touch

Engagement structures are in place that help scrutiny to hear from a wide range of tenants

Finally, we believe that the most helpful advice comes from those who have been directly involved in successful scrutiny and from those with a national overview. We have therefore included tips from each of our interviewees to help guide, reassure and inspire anyone looking to develop tenant scrutiny in their council.



2. Introduction

We have produced this research report to help support council tenant scrutiny in England. While there has been a lot of attention on scrutiny for housing associations, we believe there is a gap when it comes to councils. We know, of course, that council tenants and landlords want the benefits that scrutiny can bring just as housing association tenants and landlords do.

We hope this report starts to fill a gap by:

- Sharing successes of council tenant scrutiny
- Showing the benefits of tenant scrutiny for both landlord and tenant
- Highlighting what helps to make council tenant scrutiny successful
- Sharing advice from tenants, councillors, officers and national experts

How this report has been produced

This report is based on research conducted by independent researcher Dr Dave Mckenna. It draws on desktop research as well as nineteen interviews including with six national experts and thirteen people directly involved with four local case studies. These interviewees included tenants, participation officers, housing managers and councillors. The four case studies are:

- Hull City Council
- London Borough of Croydon
- North West Leicestershire District Council
- Swindon Borough Council

These cases cover different parts of the country and different types of council. We have highlighted helpful practice examples from each, throughout the report.

About the author Dr Dave Mckenna

Dave is an independent consultant and researcher who helps councils and other public bodies with training, research and improvement work. He is an Honorary Research Fellow at Swansea University and an associate with the Centre for Public Scrutiny, the University of South Wales and the Institute of Local Government Studies. He has over twenty years of local government experience including as a scrutiny manager and tenant participation officer.

How to use this report

We want this report to be of practical use and have written it for any tenants, officers and councillors who are looking to start or improve tenant scrutiny in their council. In the report we have included examples drawn from the case studies and advice from those involved with successful tenant scrutiny that you can use in a number of ways:

- To help make the case for tenant scrutiny in your council
- Suggestions for new things that you might try
- Inspiration for new ways of doing things
- Added confidence for the things you are already doing

Remember, there is no one right way of doing things. You are the expert in your world and will know what will work best for you.



3. What's different about council tenant scrutiny?

Tpas describe tenant scrutiny as:

*"... a process for carrying out resident-led reviews of all areas of an organisation's business. It is stated in housing regulation and forms a large part of an organisational approach to welcoming in-depth examination."*¹

Tenant scrutiny usually involves a panel of tenants who meet regularly, give feedback to the landlord, gather evidence and make recommendations as part of in-depth reports. There is no set of rules for exactly how tenant scrutiny should operate, and everyone has their own way of working.

Councils in England are expected to have tenant scrutiny arrangements in the same way as housing associations. This is not always the case, however, as a recent report by the Local Government Association produced with Tpas (Flynn, 2019) suggests:

*"Many organisations have a resident led scrutiny framework in place that complements the democratic scrutiny process and councils managing governance group. Many do not have scrutiny in place however, which is a key requirement of the regulatory standards."*²

Scrutiny for council tenants is similar in many ways to scrutiny for those in housing association homes. There are some important differences however:

Size – although all social housing providers come in many shapes and sizes, local councils tend to be bigger organisations. Councils deliver a range of functions beyond social housing and this means that tenant scrutiny needs to deal with a diverse range of departments that are likely to set up differently in every council.

Decision making – unlike housing associations that will be run by a board of appointed and co-opted members, councils are run by elected councillors. Some will have cabinet style decision making with a cabinet member responsible for social housing and others will be run under a committee system with a chair or a housing committee who plays an important role. Alongside cabinet and committees there are likely to be scrutiny committees made up of councillors. The challenge for council tenant scrutiny is to connect into these structures and with elected councillors. These councillors are not only involved in making council decisions but they also represent the local areas where tenants and residents live.

Culture – councils are likely to have a more traditional culture than housing associations. This is partly due to the much older and extensive rules that regulate local government, the size of councils and the fact that councils are merged or restructured much less frequently than housing associations. All of this means that cultures can be become embedded over many years. As a result, new ways of doing things, such as tenant scrutiny, can be more of a challenge.

While the differences listed above are important, many of the issues for council tenant scrutiny will be the same as they are for housing associations. Part of the value of this research, however, is that the ideas and advice it provides are known to work in the context of local councils.

¹ Tpas, 2020. National Tenant Engagement Standards. 2nd Edition

² Flynn, E. 2019. Engaging and empowering tenants in council-owned housing. London: Local Government Association.



4. Four success stories

Our four success stories come from different parts of the country and represent different types of council. What they all have in common is a long track record of successful tenant scrutiny.

Hull City Council

Hull's independent tenant scrutiny panel, set up following their tenant compact of 2011, was co-designed with tenants. Over the last few years successful scrutiny reports have included legal services, anti-social behaviour, street scene, caretaking services in multi-story flats (Chartered Institute of Housing award winner) and laundry services. In addition, Hull were the first local authority to get Tpas accreditation.

Laundry service

"We did scrutiny of the laundry service and we wanted to have a system that didn't involve money. It was based on tokens before, but the caretakers didn't want to take money. We came up with the idea of a card device and we found a company that would do this. It's now working really well, and the company has been scrutinised by the council's scrutiny."

Ann Reekie, Tenant Scrutiny Panel

London Borough of Croydon

The Housing Scrutiny Panel of the London Borough of Croydon has been going for fifteen years. This panel consists of a small group of volunteer residents who meet regularly to look at housing services in detail³. Over time there have been between five and eleven members and the panel can include up to fifteen. The panel typically complete two or three reviews a year. Recent examples have included communications, repairs, neighbourhood wardens and complaints. Overall, 90% of recommendations get accepted with reasons given for those that are not.

Communications

"After the communications scrutiny the wording of leaflets changed, and the websites changed and there was also cross training for departments. This helped a lot of residents who don't have English as first language or learning difficulties or didn't have the time".

Yaw John Boateng, Tenant Scrutiny Panel

³ Croydon council website: <https://www.croydon.gov.uk/housing/residents/hsp>



North West Leicestershire District Council

The Tenant Scrutiny Panel at North West Leicestershire “has an excellent track record of helping to shape and improve our housing services and 100% of recommendations made by the panel have been approved by Cabinet and implemented by the housing service”⁴. The Panel, originally set up in 2012, completes two to three inspections of different service areas a year. Recent inspections have looked at repairs (Tpas excellence in scrutiny award), anti-social behaviour, estate management and complaints. There are currently five panel members although there have been up to eight.

Decent homes project

“The first scrutiny was the decent homes project. We thought 95% satisfaction with homes was high but, when we looked, it was really about 70%. There was nothing wrong with the contract, it was just not policed properly. Through our scrutiny we brought it up to 80%. We did that by sending out questionnaires asking people if they were happy to be contacted and we went out and inspected the work. It raised the profile of scrutiny. When a report was done by the contractor, they had to give a report to the tenant as well as to the council and the tenant had to sign it off at the end. This was all a result of the report. There were two contractors and their reports were similar at the end even though one was providing a poor service to begin with.”

Janet Higgins, Tenant Scrutiny Panel

Swindon Borough Council

The tenant scrutiny panel for Swindon Borough Council “is a group of trained volunteer council tenants who review the services delivered by Swindon Borough Council's housing departments”⁵. As well as completing a number of reviews since starting out in 2012, the panel has regular local area performance review meetings with heads of service and acts as the ‘designated person’ for complaints. The panel only includes tenants and has no councillors or officers as members.

One stop shop

“In Swindon we had a one stop shop. We looked at it last year. It was a new service, but it had holes in it. Sometimes tenants had to bring in evidence and there wasn't a fool proof facility for copying material. After we looked at it, they put in two encrypted terminals to allow tenants and non-tenants to do their own documentation. These terminals take photos, scan documents and give a reference number that is traceable. We already knew that information could get lost. Parish councils and libraries will now also have these machines.”

Phil Matthews, Tenant Scrutiny Panel

⁴ North West Leicestershire council website:

https://www.nwleics.gov.uk/pages/tenant_scrutiny_panel_meeting_dates_2015_16

⁵ Swindon Borough Council website: https://www.swindon.gov.uk/info/20056/council_tenants/271/tenant_scrutiny_panel



5. The benefits of council tenant scrutiny

Tenant scrutiny provides an additional resource for the landlord that helps make a difference for tenants. A recent review of research highlights that ‘scrutiny of services and other types of service-review by tenants were seen as particularly significant in enabling tenants to have a demonstrable impact on services’⁶. The case studies in this report all confirm this finding.

The interviewees told us that tenant scrutiny provides benefits because it:

- Gives a tenant perspective on complex issues that the landlord wouldn’t otherwise have
- Allows a focus on important but hidden issues that might not otherwise be looked at
- Responds to the issues that tenants are most concerned about
- Involves a group of tenants who gain specialist knowledge and are also able to see the big picture

Five big benefits

The five big benefits for the organisation and for tenants are:

1. Improved services for tenants

Whether through in-depth pieces of work or regular performance conversations with housing managers, all of the cases highlighted service improvements as a benefit of tenant scrutiny. As well as service improvements the cases also show improvements in tenant satisfaction as more tenant friendly services are provided. So, for example, a North West Leicestershire review of repairs led to a specialist repairs call centre being set up with an increase in tenants’ satisfaction as a result.

2. Better value for money

Tenant scrutiny promotes value for money because tenants, as rent payers, want housing department budgets to be spent as well as they can be. In Hull, for example, the financial impacts of scrutiny reviews are calculated to show the difference that has been made. A recent review of caretaking, for example, saved around £60,000 in total.

3. Stronger relationship between the council and tenants

Scrutiny plays an important role in showing that tenants are involved in the housing service and this in turn improves the reputation of the council in the eyes of tenants. Tenant scrutiny can also help staff feel that they are being listened to.

4. Enhanced information and communication

Tenant scrutiny helps to get information out to tenants more effectively. As well as passing on information in a way that tenants trust, tenant scrutiny can help improve landlord communications. In Croydon, for example, a review of communications looked specifically at how information was provided across a range of methods. Getting tenant scrutiny involved can be particularly helpful when the issue is a controversial one, such as when service reductions are planned.

⁶ Preece, J., 2019. Understanding approaches to tenant participation in social housing. Sheffield: UK Collaborative Centre for Housing Evidence



5. An opportunity for tenants to develop

As well as benefits for tenants and for the organisation, tenant scrutiny creates benefits for the people that join the panels. Through their involvement in scrutiny and through the training that comes alongside it, tenants gain experience, skills, knowledge and confidence. Employability can also be a benefit. In Hull, for example, references are provided, and involvement has led to people getting a job with the housing department.



6. The ten keys to successful council tenant scrutiny

As part of the research we asked what was helpful to make tenant scrutiny successful in councils. In response we heard about a range of different things that tenants, councillors and officers have noticed have been helpful and we have summarised these into a list of ten keys to success. While every council is different, and there is no absolute right way to do things, the list should be helpful for those who want to reflect on how tenant scrutiny in their council might be developed or improved.

Ten keys to success

Here are the ten keys to success. The list might be used as a checklist to help you think about where things are working well and what might be improved. The individual sections might be used to help you think through each topic in detail.

1. Learning and development

Tenants have the knowledge, skills and confidence they need

2. Support and resources

Tenants have what they need to be effective and aren't out of pocket

3. Relationships and respect

Trust and mutual appreciation help to ensure a constructive relationship

4. Organisational culture

All officers are responsive to tenants and the organisation is committed to effective tenant engagement

5. Role and recognition

Scrutiny has a clear and understood role in the decision-making structures for housing

6. Scrutiny process

A consistent and robust approach is in place for in-depth scrutiny work

7. Senior buy-in

A supportive and positive culture is led from the top

8. Access to information

Tenants have the information they need to pick topics and reach conclusions

9. Recruiting and retaining

Processes are in place to help find and appoint new members who are the right fit for tenant scrutiny

10. Keeping in touch

Engagement structures are in place that help scrutiny to hear from a wide range of tenants



1. Learning and development

“We are still learning, and we have been doing this since 2012.”
Janet Higgins, Tenant Scrutiny Panel, North West Leicestershire

The importance of learning and development was highlighted in each of the four cases. It’s important that tenants have the knowledge, skills and confidence that they need to provide effective scrutiny. Training that is provided by officers, or where tenants and officers learn together, can play an important role in building relationships. Evidence from the cases illustrated the variety of ways that learning and development might happen:

- Learning and development might be formal, for example training courses, such as those provided by Tpas, or informal, such as asking the resident engagement team for advice
- It can be provided by the housing organisation, for example by officers who work in a particular service area, or independently by consultants.
- Training can be provided for new members of panels and, in some areas, tenants need to go through training before they can join, or to top up the skills of existing panel members
- Learning might involve general courses for things like asking questions or gathering evidence or might be specific to a piece of work that the panel has decided to do
- Spending time with professionals such as repairs staff, for example, can provide a good learning opportunity
- Meeting up with other tenants doing scrutiny work with other councils or housing associations can be helpful

Examples from the cases included:

- North West Leicestershire used independent trainers when they first set up their scrutiny panel to ensure tenants had the right start
- In North West Leicestershire the panel bring in a specialist at the start of a review to provide a briefing and ensure that the tenants have a solid knowledge base at the start
- Hull have a 12-week Housing Academy, with a certificate at the end, that tenants go through before joining the panel. Provided by the housing department, the Academy is an opportunity to learn about a range of housing topics alongside officers
- Shadowing works well in North West Leicestershire where during reviews tenants go out with a relevant officer for half a day to get first-hand learning about a service
- Swindon tenants meet regularly with tenants from other areas to share ideas and good practice



2. Support and resources

“Committing resources is important. You can’t get around that or expect to do it otherwise. You are expecting residents to give up time and expertise there needs to be a corresponding commitment by the organisation.”

Sarah Davis, Chartered Institute of Housing

As tenant scrutineers are typically unpaid volunteers it’s important to provide support so that they can work effectively and to ensure that no-one is out of pocket. More than this, providing support shows that the organisation is committed in the same way that the tenant scrutineers are. Practical support might come from dedicated resident engagement officers, from housing staff or from independent people. Providing help with printing, broadband and I.T. equipment is important as is cash to cover travel, telephone and other expenses.

In each of the case studies support and resources were provided to help tenant scrutiny to work effectively although the support provided varied from case to case. The council might:

- Support meeting arrangements such as provide rooms and refreshments
- Provide a link officer to help the panel get information
- Work flexibly and respond to tenant needs as they arise
- Draft action plans and reports for the tenants to agree
- Help with any costs that tenants incur for taking part

Examples from the case studies:

- In Hull an officer works alongside the tenants and supports the review as their own project – working behind the scenes to promote the final report
- A council officer acts as a sounding board for the panel in Hull
- North West Leicestershire provide a ring-fenced travel budget
- Swindon provide support for transport, childcare and expenses as well as provide laptops
- In Croydon the resident engagement team help with drafting reports and action plans
- Croydon council loan laptops and pay for printing



3. Relationships and respect

“It’s rapport and trust. You have got to build trust with tenant scrutiny. Empathy and rapport. Spending formal and informal time together.”

Arlene Griffin, Housing Manager, Swindon Borough Council

“People say landlords never listen but if officers and landlords can convince tenants that they do listen that helps. The saying is ‘your actions speak so loud I can’t hear what you are saying’.”

Yaw John Boateng, Croydon Tenants Panel

A major theme in all of the case studies was the importance of the relationships between the tenants involved in scrutiny and the councillors and officers running the housing service. Effective scrutiny requires good relationships and these in turn depend on trust, respect and appreciation for each other.

Good relationships are constructive and allow tenants to ask the difficult questions and provide critical feedback and, at the same time, allow councillors and officers to give honest answers and really listen to what the tenants are saying.

Ultimately tenant scrutiny is a partnership with everyone committed to a common aim. Tenants recognise that councillors and officers want to provide the best service that they can, and councillors and officers respect the fact that tenant scrutineers are active volunteers willing to give up their time.

The case studies highlighted three ways that constructive relationships are supported:

- Regular face to face contact, formal and informal, helps to support and maintain good relationships and build trust
- Being appreciative of the work that each other are doing. When departments ask tenant scrutiny to look at something this shows they appreciate the work
- Showing respect through words and actions, for example always considering suggestions and being honest when things can’t be done or officers having the same professional approach as they do for council committees

Examples from the case studies:

- In Hull, tenant scrutineers invite heads of service and housing officers to their meetings
- In North West Leicestershire the director of housing attends scrutiny meetings
- In North West Leicestershire the Cabinet and Chief Executive are always positive about the work that scrutiny is doing, and the Chief Executive takes time out to meet the tenants who are doing the work
- In all of the cases, tenants and staff do courses together and this helps to build relationships
- In Hull the scrutiny chair has access to the cabinet member and is invited to present at the council’s scrutiny committee
- Swindon tenant scrutineers invite the cabinet members, and other councillors, to have a cup of tea with them



4. Organisational culture

“The way we embrace tenant engagement is considerable. Tenants are seen as being a valuable influencer of our service and they are valued.”

Dave Richmond, Hull City Council

The wider culture of the organisation is an important factor if tenant scrutiny is to succeed. Tenant scrutiny works best when the organisation as a whole is responsive to the needs of tenants and where there is a commitment to tenant engagement at all levels. It's the day-to-day interactions between staff and tenants that matter, and a positive culture will be one of openness, flexibility and listening. Tenants should be seen as an asset for developing the service and be valued by the organisation. In all of the cases there is a background of success in tenant involvement and this provides a foundation for tenant scrutiny to build on.

The case studies suggest a number of ways that a more supportive culture can be encouraged. Staff at all levels, but particularly senior councillors and management, can encourage a more supportive culture through what they say, write and do:

- Say – sharing the importance of tenant engagement regularly at meetings
- Write – getting the engagement message across in reports, newsletters and press releases, for example
- Do – responding to tenant suggestions wherever possible and letting everyone know. Sometimes this is known as ‘you said, we did’

Examples from case studies:

- In Croydon resident engagement officers regularly attend departmental management team meetings to talk about tenant engagement more widely
- In Hull tenant engagement is actively embedded in service development and planning
- In Hull the staff newsletter features positive stories about tenant engagement
- Officers in Swindon recognise that tenant involvement lends credibility to the work that they do and the changes they make to services



5. Role and recognition

“Where it becomes a significant part of the structure it can become a powerful tool.”

Sarah Davis, Chartered Institute of Housing

To be effective tenant scrutiny needs to have a clear role that is recognised by all. This means having both a clear role in the council’s structures but also a distinct role in tenant engagement arrangements. This means thinking about how tenant scrutiny connects with:

- The council’s cabinet
- The council’s scrutiny committee(s)
- The senior housing management team
- The main tenant engagement group

There is no one right way to do this. In each of the cases the arrangements were different, and everyone needs to find what works best for them. One helpful approach is to ‘co-design’ the arrangements with councillors and officers, perhaps through the tenant compact, and to regularly revisit how things are working.

- In North West Leicestershire the panel reports to main tenant engagement group after they report to Cabinet
- In Swindon tenant scrutiny reports go to a Cabinet Member Advisory Group
- The tenants scrutiny panel in Swindon have quarterly heads of service meetings with the opportunity to consider and challenge performance reports
- In Hull a tenant compact governs the way that engagement takes place, and everyone signs up to it. It’s refreshed every four years to make sure it stays up to date
- In Hull the People and Communities scrutiny chair invites tenant scrutineers to come and engage and present reports at least quarterly



6. Scrutiny process

“Be as evidence based as possible.”

Jacqui McKinlay, Centre for Public Scrutiny

“It depends on the quality and depth of scrutiny whether it makes a difference.”

Yvonne Davies, Scrutiny and Empowerment Partners

In terms of scrutiny work, the mainstay of each of the cases was making a difference through in depth pieces of work. Sometime called reviews, inquiries, reports or even deep dives, these pieces of scrutiny work involve picking a topic, scoping the work, collecting evidence, drafting the report, presenting the report and following up to see what the impact has been. While every process has its differences, the fundamentals are the same and the best work relies on having a clear process that is tried, tested and tenant led. In the case studies, panels found it helpful to have a standard report format for each stage. These can be designed by the panel or borrowed from council scrutiny or audit, for example.

Here are some examples from the case studies of how it might work at different stages:

- In Croydon tenants look at performance information to help them decide the service area to look at. While officers may ask for things to be scrutinised it is the tenants that make the final decision
- In Croydon the service manager gives a brief overview with strengths and weaknesses at the start of a review and the tenants then do a scoping report to plan out how the scrutiny will work and what the focus will be
- In North West Leicestershire the panel hold interviews and review reports as part of their inquiries
- In Croydon evidence gathering includes mystery shopping and desktop research including looking at what other landlords are doing. Findings are reviewed by the panel at each stage and might influence what gets looked at next
- In Croydon the report gets presented to service managers and sometimes directors and sometimes Cabinet members. Officers must give a reason why if they do not accept a recommendation. At the meeting an action plan is agreed with officers' names by actions with a completion date. This action plan is published on the website
- In Croydon the action plan is monitored quarterly
- In North West Leicestershire officers named in an action plan attend the panel and update quarterly until the actions are completed. There is some flexibility as some things change over time



7. Senior buy-in

“To have strategic input the provider has to be willing and open to scrutiny. It may be more difficult for tenants to direct strategy from 'outside', but there is a lack of evidence about informal methods of influencing. It worked best where senior leaders had passion.”

Jenny Preece, University of Sheffield

All of the cases reflected the need for senior buy-in if tenant scrutiny is to be successful. If tenant engagement and scrutiny is going to be part of the culture, part of the DNA of the organisation, then that has to start at the top with council leaders, cabinet members, chief executives and service directors. Buy-in is reflected in both words and action.

Here are some examples from the cases:

- Tenants in North West Leicestershire notice that senior management are regularly mentioning their support for scrutiny informally at meetings, cabinet members and the chief executive always talks positively about tenant scrutiny and takes time out to meet with tenants
- The director of housing and the assistant director attend scrutiny meetings in North West Leicestershire
- The cabinet member attends scrutiny meetings in North West Leicestershire as a non-voting member and is happy to discuss ideas – he is seen as ‘measured and informative’
- Tenants in Swindon regard cabinet members officers as being committed and pro scrutiny
- In Hull the cabinet member for housing is seen as being ‘very on board’ and has regular meetings with the panel
- In Croydon cabinet members and managers take time to see scrutiny reports and tenants know that they find them useful



8. Access to information

“Issues are not just ‘plucked out of thin air’ they are based on trends in service delivery, from working with heads of service, from looking at performance data, from trends around complaints”

Arlene Griffin, Swindon Borough Council

“Tenants need the right information to do the good work”

Dave Richmond, Hull City Council

Having access to information is important if scrutiny panels are to pick the right topics to look at and be able to shape the best recommendations from their work. Sharing information goes hand in hand with having an open and supportive culture. It’s helpful for a tenant scrutiny panel to have a link person who can help them get the information they need for specific pieces of work.

Examples from the case studies include:

- Swindon give their panel access to all of their databases, for example HouseMark
- In North West Leicestershire the officers responsible for particular service areas attend meetings so they can answer questions
- In Swindon the panel will look through complaints reports to help spot issues
- In Swindon tenants attend quarterly performance review meetings with senior officers and have picked they picked up issues for in depth work from that
- In Swindon there is an arrangement that tenants groups are covered by GDPR and they sign a disclaimer and this means there can be some access to personal data if required
- In North West Leicestershire the panel use information to identify scrutiny topics including HouseMark data, Key Performance Indicators, customer satisfaction data as well as asking the cabinet member and director
- In Croydon, HouseMark STAR surveys are used to help decide what to look into



9. Recruiting and retaining

“The interview process is really important. The work is intense and can be technical so you need people who can be the right fit for the role.”

Claire Cuthbert, Swindon Borough Council

In all of the cases recruitment was seen as an important challenge; whether bringing in new people, ensuring the panel is more diverse or finding people who want to stay involved. While having a formal process can be helpful to make sure prospective scrutineers are the right fit and more likely to last, taking advantage of existing methods of publicity, such as tenant newsletters and the councils job adverts, can help to reach a wider pool of people.

Some examples from the cases:

- Croydon publicise their tenant scrutiny vacancies including through the council job pages
- Croydon treat panel vacancies like jobs including a person specification and the benefits people would get – this gets a big response from people who might not normally apply such as students and former tenants
- Croydon have an assessment process that includes an interview with someone from the resident involvement team and two tenant representatives
- In North West Leicestershire, once the panel have decided who they want to be involved, they attend a few meetings and undergo training and then the panel and the potential member decide if it will be right for them
- In Swindon there is a formal interview process with the chair of the panel and an officer



10. Keeping in touch

“You’ve got to keep in touch with your tenant base so it’s not your views but the views of others.”
Yvonne Davies, Scrutiny and Empowerment Partners

It is clear from the case studies that, one of the things that makes tenant scrutiny so valuable, is the ability to provide a tenant perspective. This is done best when scrutiny is able to hear from a wide range of tenants and can keep an ear to the ground. There are a number of different ways of engaging that might be used including estate and street walks, sitting in on tenant and resident meetings and being present on social media platforms where housing and community issues are being discussed. It’s always helpful to go to where people would normally meet.

Keeping in touch is different to consulting on a specific topic. It involves simply listening or asking open questions such as ‘how are things?’ or ‘anything you think we need to be aware of?’ Engagement can also be two way – scrutiny feeding back to tenants when their input has made a difference.

Examples from the cases include:

- North West Leicestershire have a ‘virtual panel’. This is an email list of people who responded to a questionnaire in the tenants newsletter. The 20 or so people on the list can be contacted quickly and easily for their views
- In Hull the panel works closely with the tenants Multi Story living Group and use it to help understand the tenants’ perspective. They also write to people, use notice boards and go to the meetings that tenants hold in community rooms
- In Hull the resident involvement team supports engagement through Facebook live, twitter and other social media
- In Swindon engagement events are held at community cafes



7. Tips and advice

At the end of each interview held for the research, people were asked for their best tips and advice for those involved in council tenant scrutiny. From the interviews for the case studies we asked what advice they would give to those in a similar role.

Advice from tenant scrutineers to tenant scrutineers

Yaw John Boateng, Croydon Tenant Scrutiny Panel

- If it's worked for me, it should work for you!
- I've derived a lot of knowledge that I wouldn't have got. I understand local and central government better. It's educational
- It takes patience and persistence and politeness. You are dealing with human beings

Janet Higgins, North West Leicestershire Tenant Scrutiny Panel

- Talk to as many other tenant scrutiny panels as you can
- Speak to Tpas
- If you know someone is doing well, ask to go along to their meetings and see their reports
- Keep an open mind
- Look at as many reports as you can
- You really have to play to peoples' skills and strengths and offer as much support as you can and keep them engaged - not always easy

Phil Matthews, Swindon Tenant Scrutiny Panel

- Keep talking to tenants from other councils
- Get organised and get active!
- In this digital age make sure no tenant gets left behind (from Emily, Swindon Tenant Scrutiny Panel)

Ann Reekie, Hull Tenant Scrutiny Panel

- Taking that first step seems like a big deal but there is a lot of strength in the tenants that they don't realise themselves
- Take it as a challenge. Every person can take things on and use their different skills. When you come together you build up a strong group and build some trust
- Trust has come about through communication and inviting people to meetings. When they come, they say "we didn't realise the tenants did so much". One or two councillors have come and been amazed and wanted to get involved and MPs as well



Advice for cabinet members from cabinet members

Councillor Roger Bayliss, North West Leicestershire District Council

- Don't be frightened of it. Encourage it and welcome it and give it your support 100%
- If I was a councillor in a council that didn't have tenant scrutiny, or if it was weak, I would tell the officers to get on the job and get on with it

Councillor Alison Butler, London Borough of Croydon

- Take it as an opportunity. It's far better to know what tenants are concerned about and interested in
- If tenants really felt strongly about something you are doing, it's best for you to know about it and they may have better ideas
- It needs resources if it is to work
- Make sure your officers are taking the process seriously - not just looking to tick a box
- Have a proper recruitment procedure in place to ensure representation and diversity
- Ensure there is education and training and make sure people know what they are signing up for

Councillor Cathy Martyn, Swindon Borough Council

- Keep it objective and keep the panel to tenants only
- You don't always have to agree
- Come and visit and see what we do. I can give my opinion but come and hear it from the tenants
- Talk to Tpas. I know that our tenants have had lots of benefit from them

Advice from housing managers to housing managers

Arlene Griffin, Swindon Borough Council

- Definitely it's worth doing, that's the first thing - the advantages definitely outweigh the disadvantages. It's a transparent way of improving services and tenant scrutiny is invaluable for involving tenants
- Whatever you do, stress the partnerships. Give tenants as much information as possible so they can come up with their own decisions
- You need to build that rapport. Putting the time in, attending the meetings, getting to find out who people are

Dave Richmond, Hull City Council

- Be self-interested. If I put my staff in, I want to get something out of it so be clear about anticipated benefits from different perspectives.
- Embrace and embed. Actively engage and start with service planning so it should start filtering down
- See it as an opportunity and an additional resource. To get that different perspective. To get something additional done. To get tenants doing it saves me time and money!
- Value it in its own right. It's a valuable perspective and will be the perspective of a large number of tenants
- Work behind the scenes to make it work
- Foster the relationship - just ring people up and have a chat, see how they are
- Make sure there is something in it for the people involved as they are giving their time freely



Advice from resident involvement officers to resident involvement officers

Justin O'Brien, North West Leicestershire District Council

- The most important thing is to have the senior management buy in
- Need to have a terms of reference to understand the role. In my first year I went to lots of team meetings in the housing service to make people aware of scrutiny
- Trust the panel with a named budget
- Make sure you are getting buy in from officers and it helps to explain what the panel is about, sometimes people just need reassurance

Claire Cuthbert, Swindon Borough Council

- You need to be having the conversations with your tenants. Join in the community events and go along and promote what you do
- Use the resources you have such as tenant newsletters to ask tenants what they want, how do they want it work. Talk to tenants about how much time are you expecting them to give
- Be flexible about how it might work
- Get messages out there such as 'you said this we did that' and get the messages back
- Involve people in what they are interested in

Sally Smith, Hull City Council

- Make sure you skill people up to do a good job. Training gives people an understanding of the housing world and where we fit
- The tenants compact is a way to get all the major players signed up
- Officers need to be able to share knowledge. You cannot expect people to scrutinise if you don't share things
- Tenants should go to national events – e.g. See the Person the campaign
- If there are problems, look at the regulatory framework. There is guidance in there about how to get started
- It's got to be a partnership of everybody working together - everybody has to understand each other's position

Chris Stock, London Borough of Croydon

- We always have a review at the end of each scrutiny exercise with the tenants so see how processes can be improved
- Get buy-in from existing resident structures
- Recruit some new blood if you can (don't just rely on your existing involved residents)
- Advertise the tenant scrutiny role like a job - a voluntary role
- Make sure people have the right skills (provide training)
- Get the right messages to housing officers to get their buy in (its purpose is to improve services, not to find fault)
- Make it fun - we have a laugh as well
- Got to keep recruiting – some people only commit for two or three years



Advice from the national experts

Sarah Davis, Chartered Institute of Housing

- Try and find your champions who will listen to you and maybe have the influence. That could be officers and councillors
- Get a foot in the door and demonstrate the value of scrutiny
- Stick with it!
- Develop a methodology that you agree with your LA how you are going to operate and report
- Feed back to the tenant base

Jackie Grannell, Tpas associate

- Get an understanding of the pressures facing the business of council housing
- You need to look at data
- Look at difference between local areas in the borough, for example, look at data to do this
- Balance the anecdotal and the data

Jacqui McKinlay, Centre for Public Scrutiny

- Get the ear of the board chair, an interested board member or the chief executive and try and assure yourself that the organisation is listening and knows you exist
- If you can, evidence your impact
- Come up with a plan to show you can make a difference
- Work hard on the work programme so that the issues are the ones that are really matter to tenants
- Be as evidence based as possible

Gillian McLaren, Tpas

- Use a co-design process that involves both key staff and tenants to ensure that a really effective, outcome focused scrutiny framework is established
- Look at what other councils are doing; join Tpas and have access to the knowledge hub of good practice and case studies from social housing providers across the country as well as networking opportunities and learning and development.
- Learn from outside the sector; there are nuggets of really good practice that can be shared

Jenny Preece, University of Sheffield

- Start by asking tenants if they would want this? Otherwise you won't know if there is an appetite
- It's all about starting the conversations

Yvonne Davies, Scrutiny and Empowerment Partners

- Stick with it
- Develop a methodology that you agree with your LA on how you are going to operate and report
- Keep in touch with your tenant base so it's not your views but the views of others
- Feed back to the tenant base
- Agreeing the scope of work with members



8. Thank you to our contributors

We are really, really grateful to everyone who gave up their time to share their knowledge and experience through phone interviews. We hope that you will also find the report helpful.

Ann Reekie, Hull Tenant Scrutiny Panel
Arlene Griffin, Swindon Borough Council
Chris Stock, London Borough of Croydon
Claire Cuthbert, Swindon Borough Council
Councillor Alison Butler, London Borough of Croydon
Councillor Cathy Martyn, Swindon Borough Council
Councillor Roger Bayliss, North West Leicestershire District Council
Dave Richmond, Hull City Council
Gillian McLaren, Tpas
Jackie Grannell, Tpas associate
Jacqui McKinlay, Centre for Public Scrutiny
Janet Higgins, North West Leicestershire Tenant Scrutiny Panel
Jenny Preece, University of Sheffield
Justin O'Brien, North West Leicestershire District Council
Phil Matthews, Swindon Tenant Scrutiny Panel
Sally Smith, Hull City Council
Sarah Davis, Chartered Institute of Housing
Yaw John Boateng, Croydon Tenant Scrutiny Panel
Yvonne Davies, Scrutiny and Empowerment Partners