

Contact Officer: Sheila Dykes

KIRKLEES COUNCIL

AD HOC SCRUTINY PANEL – RESIDENTIAL HOUSING STOCK, HEALTH AND SAFETY COMPLIANCE

Wednesday 22nd December 2021

Present:

Councillor Susan Lee-Richards
Councillor Elizabeth Smaje
Councillor Anthony Smith
Linda Summers (Co-optee)

In attendance: Kevin McAllister, Independent Advisor

Observer: Councillor Harpreet Uppal

Apologies: Councillor Amanda Pinnock

28 Membership of the Panel

Apologies were received from Councillor Amanda Pinnock.

29 Minutes of Previous Meetings

The minutes of the meetings of the Panel held on 26th October 2021 and 10th November 2021 were agreed as a correct record.

30 Interests

No interests were declared.

31 Admission of the Public

All items were considered in public session.

32 Deputations and Petitions

No deputations or petitions were received.

33 Public Question Time

No questions were received.

34 Fire Safety Resident Engagement Framework

Representatives of the Tenant Advisory and Grants Panel (TAGP), the Housing Advisory Board (HAB) and a Fire Safety Champion (FSC) were welcomed to the meeting to speak with the Panel about the Fire Safety Resident Engagement Framework.

These were:

Antoinette Cooper and Mel Spencer from the TAGP

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Isaac Dziya and Brooke Reed from the HAB
Paul Lee, a Fire Safety Champion.

Michelle Anderson-Dore - Head of Partnerships, Homes and Neighbourhoods and Graham Sykes, General Manager Partnerships gave a short introduction outlining the background to the development of the Framework, as part of the Fire Safety Management Plan, and the approach to engagement and communication with residents to ensure that the voice of the tenant was strong and effective.

Naz Parkar - Service Director, Homes and Neighbourhoods and Eric Hughes - Head of Business Assurance and Transformation were also in attendance.

Antoinette and Mel gave a presentation and explained that:

- The TAGP members were all tenants of Kirklees living in different places.
- Fire safety was an item on all TAGP agendas. Updates and answers were demanded and expected on issues raised previously.
- Issues could be escalated through the management structure if it was considered that a quick enough response was not being achieved, but excellent support was given by officers.
- The Panel had a tracker to follow-up on actions, which was reviewed at each meeting.
- The Panel could be very persistent and would provide challenge when needed.
- Tenants provided feedback in various ways such as directly to individual members of the Panel, or via the Tenants and Residents' Associations (TRAs) and Community Voices.
- It was considered that the fire safety information provided for tenants in the high-rise and six storey blocks had been significantly improved.
- The Panel recognised that individual tenants, and their visitors, had responsibilities of their own and that the Council, as landlord, had responsibilities to ensure that the policies and procedures were carried out.
- The Panel was fully aware of how an issue could be escalated and how to pursue an issue until resolved including, ultimately, to the Health and Safety Executive or the Ombudsman.

Questions and comments were invited, with the following issues being covered:

- In terms of the position of more vulnerable tenants, there was a 'stay safe' policy in place and every tenant was aware of this or had the opportunity to be aware of it. Information notices were provided near lifts.
- In respect of how the Housing Advisory Board held the Council to account; Isaac and Brooke explained that the Board had looked at the strategies, plans, finances and risks associated with all programmes and would hold the Authority to account, querying any variances and the underlying reasons for these. It was considered that there was a good working relationship with Council officers, but members were clear on the need for assurance in terms of due diligence and accountability and would escalate issues if necessary. The Board took its responsibilities very seriously and were very thorough. The Head of Building Safety provided an informative review at each meeting.

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- Paul explained that he was newly appointed to the role of Fire Safety Champion but had received an induction including basic fire safety training and a tour of the high-rise blocks. He had also spoken with senior social housing officers, visited the security room and met the team working on the fire doors. Speaking as a resident of one of the six storey blocks, he did not consider that the same level of awareness existed in respect of the 'stay safe' policy in his block. He considered that he had a clear understanding of how the role would develop and agreed that he felt supported and valued. He said that there was a lot of information and background, such as the existence of the TRAs, TAGP and HAB, that he had previously been unaware of. The current level of engagement with other tenants was not significant but this was something that would be built up through speaking to the local TRA and Community Voices.
- In response to a question about whether residents felt that they were listened to and were confident that concerns would be actioned/receive a response:
 - Paul said that his experience of communication with the Council was good, he always received a response and was in touch with the ward councillors. He gave an example of issue with an external fire door which had been dealt with in a matter of hours. He was aware of how to progress any issues or problems.
 - Antoinette said that timely answers were normally received and, when a concern had been raised, the Head of Service had met with the Panel to answer all their queries.
 - Isaac said that he considered that the communication with officers was good, and that training and orientation had been provided to the tenant members of the HAB. Answers were usually provided immediately to queries put forward in meetings, but members could also raise an issue by phone or, more formally, in writing.
- In respect of communication with the wider body of tenants and leaseholders and their ability to raise issues and concerns, it was explained that:
 - The TAGP met every month with officers and prior to this meeting met as a tenants' group to review and discuss the agenda. TRA meetings also took place on a regular basis and there was also input through the Community Voices. Members attended forum meetings four times a year to meet with TRAs and voices from around the district.
 - Brooke explained that she received feedback informally from attendance at her community centre, and considered that networking was important, such as that between the different panels.
 - Paul said that he believed further training and background knowledge would be required as the FSC role progressed and it was important to be kept informed. He was also conscious of the need to become more involved in networking opportunities.
- In relation to awareness and understanding of the resources and information being made available by the Authority, such as the compliance videos and Fire Risk Assessments:
 - Paul said that he was not aware of these but would be interested in having access.
 - Antoinette explained that the Fire Risk Assessments were available online for the six-storey blocks; previously they had not been specific to each block but this was the case now. A newsletter had been sent to all tenants on the issue of keeping safe at Christmas.

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- It was explained that, as the numbers of Fire Safety Champions increased, the intention was to bring them together to look at best practice across the blocks and share ideas.
- Ward Councillors had previously been notified of TRA Forum meetings, this had halted due to the pandemic but had been, or would certainly be, reinstated.
- The TAGP representatives were asked if their action tracker could be shared with the members of the Panel and it was suggested that there did not appear to be any reason why this could not be done.
- There was an aspiration to share the minutes of the TAGP meetings to increase transparency and celebrate the work of the Panel and possible mechanisms to do this would be considered.
- In respect of discussion with the HAB and TAGP about the lessons learned from engagement on the high-rise blocks that could be taken forward within the roll-out of engagement with other tenants:
 - Brooke explained that most of the information provided to the HAB, to date, had related to the high-rise blocks but fire safety information for the rest of the housing stock would be welcomed.
 - Antoinette said that she considered that many of the issues for the high-rise blocks would also apply to the six-storey blocks.
 - It was explained that full communications and engagement, in respect of the low-rise blocks, would be undertaken once the programme started to be rolled out. It was important to note that the low-rise blocks were not currently in scope in Government guidance but all the high risk actions identified under the Fire Risk Assessments were being undertaken and the medium to low risks were to be included in the relevant contract.
- In respect of the flow of information to tenants and leaseholders, it was considered to be important that this was done at the earliest possible opportunity and it was questioned what communications had been/were planned. It was explained that only the four high-rise blocks were statutorily defined high risk residential buildings at present, but the authority had chosen to expand the scope to include the six storey blocks and retirement living schemes in the first instance and then the low-rise blocks with communal areas. The engagement strategy used for the high-rise, six storey and retirement living schemes would be used for the low-rise blocks. Learning would be taken into account as the process moved forward and good practice incorporated. Officers were confident that they knew what worked in terms of communication, albeit that there were some gaps to address, and they were conscious that messages needed to be constantly reinforced.
- In response to a question about communication with vulnerable tenants, reassurance was given that the importance of face-to-face engagement was recognised, both in terms of engagement and understanding, and that there would be direct communication with tenants about the changes.
- It was suggested that an email should be sent out to councillors, at an early opportunity, to inform them of the process that would be followed in respect of engagement, to map out the process and provide information on the programme.

Thanks were extended to the Fire Safety Champion and the representatives of the TAGP and the HAB for attending and contributing to the meeting.

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The Chair gave an update on the work of the Ad Hoc Panel and the information that had been made available to it since commencing work in July 2021.