

THE FUTURE OF TENANT AND RESIDENT INVOLVEMENT IN WIRRAL

1.0 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1.1 The purpose of this report is to:-

- a) provide Members with an overview of the current issues and recent opportunities which have arisen in relation to the further development of tenant and resident involvement in Wirral.
- b) provide the outcomes of a recent review of the current arrangements between Wirral Federation of Tenants and Residents Association (WFTRA), Wirral Partnership Homes (WPH) and the Council arising from a wider community consultation exercise on future tenant and resident involvement in Wirral.
- c) seek Members' endorsement of the proposal received by Voluntary Community Action Wirral (VCAW) for community engagement and consultation with tenants and residents.

2.0 BACKGROUND

- 2.1 WFTRA was formed in May 2000, its role being to act as an umbrella organisation for tenant and residents groups in Wirral; providing a collective voice and a mechanism for feeding back issues raised by Council tenants groups.
- 2.2 Following the housing Stock Transfer in 2005 to Wirral Partnership Homes (WPH) Wirral Council and WPH entered into a three way agreement with WFTRA to support them with funding primarily from WPH and the Council for their previous role and function of an umbrella group for tenant and resident groups to continue.

3.0 NATIONAL POLICY

- 3.1 In terms of Central Government policy, there has been a significant change over recent years in what has traditionally been called 'tenant participation' but is now increasingly referred to as 'resident' or 'customer' engagement and involvement.
- 3.2 The government, through the Audit Commission and the recently established Homes and Communities Agency (HCA) and Tenant Services Authority (TSA), places effective community engagement and involvement at the heart of its work to develop sustainable communities where local people want to live and work.
- 3.3 In response to these structural and organisational changes there are increased requirements placed on social landlords (RSLs) to introduce a more flexible approach to community engagement, adjusting their methods to suit the needs and opportunities of local areas and people.

- 3.4 Whilst this approach, may include some of the traditional activities and structures of 'tenant participation', it obviously will have different aims and objectives. This new approach, whilst more inclusive and therefore should be better from a tenants and residents perspective, does not fit easily with the established model of tenant participation which is more structured, formal and less able to adapt to the variable or changing needs of individual communities.
- 3.5 RSL's, to meet the changing agenda, are increasingly aligning their resident and customer involvement policies with those of customer care and equality and diversity, to ensure this more flexible and fully inclusive approach to community engagement is achieved.
- 3.6 The HCA is clear in its policy 'People first; Delivering change through involvement', that it expects RSL's to embrace this new emerging model of involvement as an integral part of their business process with involvement directed towards achieving positive outcomes for residents, communities and RSL's. In particular, the HCA has developed 10 basic building blocks as a baseline for involvement which it expects RSL's to engage with, which are:
- Ensuring people have equal opportunities to take part in involvement and take active steps to engage with under-represented and vulnerable groups;
 - RSL's should develop a profile of residents in their homes and make positive effort to develop 'market intelligence' on their needs and aspirations;
 - RSL's should provide accessible information and feedback and take an open approach to providing information that is requested. This should include feedback on performance, comparison with peers and action taken to improve; feedback on how involvement has brought about change and feedback on complaints, lessons learnt and changes made;
 - Developing a range of methods of involvement, with active residents and / or communities, that allow people to be involved on their terms;
 - Negotiate with residents and / or communities, the terms of reference for involvement activities;
 - Enabling involvement by providing properly resourced capacity building and training for residents, staff and where appropriate, communities;
 - Developing with residents and / or communities, ways to negotiate service targets, influence corporate decision making and hold the RSL to account;
 - Developing and sustaining mechanisms, with residents and / or communities, which enable influence over investment in and the design of affordable homes, and where relevant, wider neighbourhood priorities;
 - Considering with residents and / or communities the value for money of involvement activities, including the added value that involvement creates;
 - Developing with residents and / or communities appropriate neighbourhood level targets and scrutiny where they want this and it is relevant.
- 3.7 In the light of the changing national policy it is important that the Council in its role as the Strategic Housing authority in Wirral supports the RSL's in meeting their objectives in terms of resident engagement and involvement and also has a comprehensive engagement strategy with the private sector residents groups in Wirral.
- 3.8 In the light of these developments and the consequent need to respond to the Government's new policy framework for resident engagement Wirral Council agreed with WPH as the major social landlord in the Borough to carry out a review of existing tenant and resident involvement to ascertain whether in the changed national policy context the current arrangements remain fit for purpose.

4.0 REVIEW OF EXISTING TENANT AND RESIDENT INVOLVEMENT IN WIRRAL

4.1 During 2008 the Council, WPH and WFTRA agreed to commission an independent specialist consultant (PS Consultants) to review existing tenant and resident involvement arrangements for Wirral, the agreement for partnership working between all partners and the options for future community engagement. The results of this review were presented to representatives of wider tenants and residents groups at an event held on 13th November 2008 to seek views about how both WPH and the Council can best work with tenants and residents in the future.

4.2 The event was well attended by 62 resident representatives, attending on behalf of a range of groups including a significant number of private tenant and resident groups.

4.3 Following on from the event in November 2008 a postal survey was conducted with a wide range of community groups and representatives, the majority of which had originally been invited to the consultation event. The postal survey endorsed a number of key themes raised at the event and sought to explore these further.

4.4 In summary, the following key findings have been identified from the consultation processes undertaken.

- There are a growing number of healthy and active local tenants and residents groups working independently of the WFTRA in their local areas on a range of community based activities.
- Only a few of WFTRA's member organisations across the borough are actively participating in the Federation at the present time.
- Following stock transfer, the current structure / operation of WFTRA does not work sufficiently effectively as its original structure and constitution was established to work with a Council housing service and Council housing tenants, which have since become part of a stock transfer organisation. Changes over recent years in national policy regarding community engagement and involvement now requires a more fully inclusive, flexible approach to be developed.
- The consultation event and postal survey carried out demonstrates that there is support by the wider Wirral community, which includes both WFTRA members, general community groups and "lone voices", for some form of alternative mechanism to support tenants, residents and community groups / representatives on Wirral.
- Membership of any new mechanism should include a wider range of people / organisations such as community associations and local general interest community groups etc.
- To ensure that any new mechanism is continually refreshed and able to move forward to address new challenges as they arise, there is clear support for the idea that it is managed in such a way that allows the Chair Person and Executive Officers if appropriate, to hold their position for a maximum of 2 years.
- Feedback regarding future funding of an alternative mechanism to support tenants, residents and community groups / representatives on the Wirral, suggests there should be a combination of funding options including Wirral Council, WPH and other local social housing landlords as well as membership fees from member groups.
- Any future involvement mechanism should be supported by a partnership which would include Wirral Council, WPH and other local social housing landlords.

5.0 A PROPOSAL FROM THE VOLUNTARY COMMUNITY ACTION WIRRAL (VCAW)

- 5.1 Prompted by the findings of the review the VCAW lead officer for Housing, Regeneration and Homelessness has recently written to both the Director of Regeneration and Chair of the Strategic Housing and Liveability Partnership (SHLP) outlining the role that VCAW currently has in relation to community engagement.
- 5.2 VCAW is keen to ensure in line with the national policy context that appropriate representation at the SHLP is structured and inclusive for all communities in Wirral, to enable both the SHLP and VCAW to engage effectively through one specific route on related issues which affect local communities.
- 5.3 Key to this is VCAW and its continuing role in providing a mechanism for local community representatives to have a clear structure for having their voice heard on key strategic issues which affect their local neighbourhoods.
- 5.4 VCAW has requested the commitment of both the Director of Regeneration and the Chair of the SHLP and an agreement on a way forward to take on board the opportunity which now presents itself through the embedding of the representative roles for the engagement of local residents.
- 5.5 Clearly this request is timely with current need to formally review the existing community representation on the SHLP, respond to the views expressed as part of the community consultation and the need to look at new opportunities to develop and enhance tenant and resident involvement across the Borough in response to national policy.
- 5.6 Members will also be aware that the Budget Resolution for 2009/10 approved by Council called for a review of the Council's community engagement function and this work which is being led by the Deputy Chief Executive/ Director of Corporate Services is also influenced by the same factors which have prompted the current review of resident engagement and involvement.

6.0 VIEWS OF THE DIRECTOR OF REGENERATION

- 6.1 Wirral Council both supports and works in partnership with VCAW of which WFTRA is a member. VCAW is the Council's preferred partner for local infrastructure and is the mechanism through which the public bodies should engage with its third sector partners in Wirral.
- 6.2 There are a number of advantages to VCAW being both the main route for the Council to use for community engagement and in aligning social tenants and residents groups with wider community groups in Wirral. These include:
- VCAW can offer access to a number of members including the WFTRA, who are representative of wider communities;
 - Access to a single body (which can represent both social and private residents and tenants groups) with which to engage on key strategic objectives, policy development and service reviews which will assist Wirral as a strategic enabling authority in its responsibilities around community engagement;
 - VCAW has an extensive membership and can act as a co-ordination point with which the Council and its officers can communicate and receive a cohesive response from local voluntary, community and faith sectors;
 - Reduction of community fatigue which can be associated with continuous and un-coordinated consultation and engagement methods;

- A further mechanism with which local voluntary, community and faith sectors can use to ensure local issues affecting them and their communities are heard and well represented;
- A channel to coordinate key strategic issues and messages which are facing its members;
- Ability to communicate key regeneration and policy matters via the VCAW newsletter;
- Access to appropriate representatives to inform and participate in key regeneration activities and working groups such as the SHLP.

6.3 The SHLP has in recent meetings agreed to support RSL's in developing their approach to tenants / community engagement in accordance with HCA and TSA requirements. As such RSL's have been keen to ensure they work closely together to ensure that collectively they secure the most appropriate and easily accessible way of addressing this. Whilst it is not intended that VCAW will detract from RSLs having their own organisation engagement and consultation structures, it is a key objective that the RSL's will work constructively with VCAW (and the groups its represents which include WFTRA), to promote their own tenant groups.

6.4 The SHLP currently has 3 places designated for community representation, to ensure the wider community has the opportunity to participate in the strategic planning of housing and related services and to participate in the planning and monitoring of the partnership extended responsibilities including Housing Market Renewal. As the SHLP plays an active role in influencing the delivery of services to address housing priorities of the Borough across all tenures, community representatives are actively recruited from the existing VCAW structures.

6.5 Clearly the opportunity presented by VCAW through its all inclusive and well established structure is key to supporting both the Council, SHLP and local RSL's to ensure current government vision and policies are taken forward to develop a new approach to community engagement and involvement in Wirral.

7.0 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

7.1 Wirral Council has agreed to provide £103,000 financial support for VCAW for 2009/10.

7.2 The Council currently contributes up to £16, 096 per annum towards the support of the WFTRA. If the proposal recommended in this report is agreed by Members then this sum would no longer be required to support the WTFRA because the VCAW would take on the role of resident and tenant engagement.

7.3 The proposal from VCAW which is set out in this report does not identify any requirement for funding at this time.

7.4 However, Members will recall that in the Council Budget Resolution for 2009/10 there was a requirement for a report on the way that the Council undertakes its community engagement function. This report is currently being prepared by the Deputy Chief Executive/Director of Corporate Services and it may be that as part of the Council's future Community Engagement Strategy funding is needed to support VCAW in relation to its work with tenants and residents groups. It is therefore proposed to reserve the current Regeneration Department budget until the outcome of the work on the Community Engagement Strategy is known.

8.0 STAFFING IMPLICATIONS

8.1 Ensuring that Wirral Council has one central conduit for consulting and engaging with local communities and stakeholders via VCAW, of which WFTRA is a member of, will enable officers and RSLs to more effectively engage tenants and residents when developing new strategies, policies and initiatives.

9.0 EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES IMPLCAITIONS

9.1 Supporting VCAW as Wirral's preferred partner and single body with which to engage, tenants and residents will ensure that all communities will have equal access to making their views known on the Strategic Housing issues affecting their communities.

10.0 COMMUNITY SAFETY IMPLICATIONS

101 Supporting VCAW will ensure that a wide range of tenants and residents in communities across the borough have the opportunity to engage with and ensure their views and concerns are raised and addressed appropriately relating to anti-social behaviour and improving their local areas.

11.0 LOCAL AGENDA 21 IMPLICATIONS

11.1 More inclusive community engagement will ensure that community's views are more representative when taking forward Local Agenda 21 objectives

12.0 PLANNING IMPLICATIONS

12.1 None arising from this report.

13.0 ANTI-POVERTY IMPLICATIONS

13.1 None arising from this report.

14.0 SOCIAL INCLUSION IMPLICATIONS

14.1 Supporting VCAW as Wirral's preferred partner and single body with which to engage tenants and residents on key strategic objectives, policy development and service reviews will assist the Council in ensuring that it promotes social inclusion.

15.0 LOCAL MEMBER SUPPORT IMPLICATIONS

15.1 This report affects all wards within Wirral.

16.0 BACKGROUND PAPERS

16.1 Cabinet – 3rd August 2005.

16.2 'People first – Delivering change through involvement'
www.housingcorp.gov.uk/server/show/conwebdoc.11159

17.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

17.1 That Cabinet:-

in the light of changing Central Government policy and the recent borough wide consultation on the future of tenant and resident involvement in Wirral, approve the

opportunity presented by VCAW, (of which WFTRA is a member), to be the partner through whom the Council in its role as Strategic Housing Authority engages with tenants and residents in Wirral.

Alan Stennard
Director of Regeneration

This report was prepared by Sue Hooper who can be contacted on 691 8245