

### **Purpose of this report**

Housing Advisory Board requested an update from the key citywide strategic tenant groups. As a new strategic tenant body has now been created, we felt that the report should be written and presented by us. This report is intended to provide an insight into the creation and direction of travel of the new strategic tenant body known as VITAL. It also provides an update from each of the citywide tenant groups.

### **Progress to date**

Between December 2014 and April 2015, tenants from our existing strategic tenant groups; CCCG, HAP's and LTF volunteered to be part of a task and finish group, to work alongside officers from the tenant involvement team, to create a new model to strengthen the tenant involvement framework and give tenants a clearer strategic voice.

This helped us create the hub model which shows the relationships and lines of communication between the different involvement groups. See appendix 1.

It was agreed that chairs and vice chairs would form the makeup of the new body and that we would be able to co-opt members in, to ensure we had a fair representation of skills, diversity and area representation.

To date, we have had four meetings. These have involved:

- Selecting a name from options put forward by the group; VITAL, Voice of involved tenants across Leeds, was chosen
- Considering in more detail the role of the group, and how it can provide leadership to the tenant involvement framework
- Creating and signing off a Terms of reference, see appendix 2
- Creating a forward work plan, see appendix 3
- Creating a draft recruitment and selection process for all involved groups.
- Creating a sub group to directly support and direct communications in relation to Universal credit and Welfare reform

We also participated in a VITAL Away Day in September. This was facilitated by an Independent Tenant Advisor, recognising the need to better understand the different groups that are represented by VITAL. At the Away Day we explored what our leadership role means in practice, communicating with and providing direction to the tenants that we represent. We also considered our relationship with the Housing Advisory Board, and in

particular how we can strengthen our role on the Housing Advisory Board as being the strategic voice of tenants.

### **VITAL - Taking the lead in Tenant Involvement**

As VITAL members, we feel that the group is evolving. We are open to change and understand that our involvement in various projects and issues will change from time to time. We see ourselves as setting the foundations for the future, both of VITAL and the overall tenant involvement framework. We want to meet the obligations of those we represent and work closely together with Housing Leeds to improve the way that services are provided to tenants. We feel that it is VITAL's role to question why things are being done. We are confident in the approach of working together with Housing Leeds to carry out improvements and can see the mutual benefits.

We are keen to formalise VITAL's role as the strategic voice of tenants by beginning to do the following:

- We are keen to be made aware of all significant policy changes and strategy developments at an early stage and be given the opportunity to have input into their development.
- We would like to be consulted on the content of HAB papers where possible prior to meetings, so that we have the opportunity to formally comment on them.
- We have developed the VITAL forward plan to link in with the HAB forward plan, so that we are considering items before they are planned for discussion at a HAB meeting. This will mean that tenant members of HAB can provide more formal feedback on behalf of tenants. We would also like to request items to be added to the HAB forward plan.
- As chairs/vice chairs of city wide tenant groups we will ensure that we carry out wider tenant consultation with relevant tenant groups.
- As VITAL members we are committed to regular HAB attendance and to providing updates on our work and outcomes achieved.

### **Our priorities for the future**

- **Create a Communications Plan to launch VITAL, scheduled for Nov/Dec 15.**

At our October meeting we will develop a communications plan on how to launch VITAL. We will utilise as many media options as we can to promote it. This will include an entry in the tenant's winter newsletter, use of Facebook and twitter, and updates on the Housing Website. We intend to explore the use of free advertising sites, Made in Leeds TV channel, radio and press where possible. We would welcome HAB's support to the launch, and in particular Cllr Coupar's support when she writes her next introduction to the winter tenant newsletter.

We are also keen to explore holding a further tenant conference, similar to that which took place in 2013.

- **Welfare reform**

Having received a presentation on Universal credit at our September meeting, we are keen to take a key role in supporting Housing Leeds as welfare reforms continue, particularly in relation to the introduction of Universal Credit. Through our work with tenant groups and individual tenants, we are aware that most tenants do not know what Universal Credit is, let alone understand how it will impact on them and their income. Careful consideration is needed to communication with tenants to give them enough notice so they can plan for the changes. We would like to take an active role in developing the communications plan to tenants over the next year or so.

We have set up a VITAL sub- group which will work with officers to consider how best to manage the communication on Welfare reform. We welcomed the HAB paper on Welfare Reform at the September HAB meeting, and would like to request that a further update on Welfare reform is added to the HAB forward plan for February 2016, as Universal Credit is implemented.

- **Budgets**

Following the central government budget announcements earlier this year we are aware of the reductions in income that will be faced by Housing Leeds, from 2016/17. Through our work with tenant groups and individual tenants, tenants are very aware that this may have an impact on the levels of service that they receive. As VITAL members we are keen to represent tenants in identifying savings and efficiency opportunities for the 2016/17 budget and beyond. We would therefore welcome some consultation on the 2016/17 budget proposals.

### **Updates provided by the citywide groups**

#### **LTF**

The review of our relationship with Housing Leeds and the establishment of VITAL has refocused our role to be primarily the champion of tenants and residents at the local level. This includes working, supporting and helping communities to become more involved and have a greater say about decisions made about their area through Tenants and Residents Associations (TARAs) and Area Representatives.

In partnership with Housing Leeds we held the first TARA conference in June 2015, to enable us to engage with Leeds tenant groups about issues and policies that impact them. The overwhelming feedback from groups was that they would like more support and communication with Housing Leeds, and could see the benefits of TARAs working more closely together to provide mutual support. We have formed a TARAs panel, made up of members of city-wide TARAs, to share communications, ideas and best practice across TARAs and ensure there is a direct link from local communities through LTF to VITAL.

#### **CCCG – Cross City Chairs group**

The CCCG, with representation from chairs of the 11 Housing Advisory Panels, has been up and running now for 18 months. We continue to meet on a monthly basis to ensure that we are running groups consistently and to share good practice of some of the community projects that we have supported. We have supported 2 citywide projects now – one to deliver

winter wellbeing packs to vulnerable older tenants, and the other to fund a city wide community payback scheme.

Two big priorities for us at the moment are to strengthen our links with Community Committees and TARAs. We have been to a number of Community Committee meetings and workshops over recent months, to ensure that we are more joined up when deciding local priorities and in funding projects. We are also keen to make more contact with TARAs in our HAP areas so that we can support TARAs in dealing with very local community issues.

### **VOLT – Voice of Older Leeds Tenants**

As the strategic older persons group we perform an advisory role on the quality of services delivered to sheltered housing tenants and other older people. We live in various types of properties and sheltered schemes across the city. We are working closely with officers to help them understand the needs of communities, influence changes to services and investment for older people's services, including attending staff team meetings each month.

To ensure that the council is aware of the views and priorities for older people we have encouraged and supported officers to set up six local forums that will be held twice a year across the city, and making a difference meetings at sheltered schemes where tenants have wanted to be involved. A VOLT member attends these meetings so feedback is provided back to the strategic meeting. We have been on a tour of various schemes so that we understand the differing needs and have commented on the facilities at each.

Our future topics will include the development of the housing support model for extra care, marketing sheltered housing and the investment across all sheltered schemes.

### **Leeds High Rise Advisory Group**

The Leeds High Rise Advisory Group has met several times through the course of the year to discuss issues of importance to residents, including cleaning, fire safety and waste management. We are also working closely with the project manager to have input into the development of the High Rise Strategy.

We held a city wide forum earlier this year to discuss pre- tenancy training and sustainable tenancies. Group discussions were held about the common problems faced by high rise tenants and we encouraged suggestions as to how we could address them.

### **Equal Access group**

Formed in July 2015 the Equal Access group represents tenants and leaseholders with disabilities and long term health conditions and their Carers, currently focussing on the priorities highlighted by attendees at the Housing Leeds Equal Access forum in April 2015.

We have met with a senior officer responsible for adaptations, received a presentation around processes and had the opportunity to feedback our experiences of applying for and receiving adaptations to our properties. It has been agreed that we will be consulted on any changes to processes and information regarding adaptations in the future.

We will be meeting with a senior officer for parking enforcement so that raise awareness of the issues concerning people with disabilities, such as parking on kerbs, the provision and siting of disabled bays and their misuse. We plan to carry out some mystery shopping so that we can assess and comment on access to public buildings and disability awareness.

## **Rainbow Roofs group**

Rainbow roofs group represents Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Trans-gender tenants. We work closely with officers to influence how housing services work with the LGB&T community and meet their needs.

A successful project that we have worked on was to provide training to the sheltered housing service raising their understanding of the issues faced by LGB&T people as they get older, require support and possibly become sheltered tenants. We attended Leeds Pride with officers, distributing information about the group and hate crime reporting.

Our future priorities include Transgender awareness and raising awareness of services supporting victims of same sex domestic violence.

## **Yagi - Young Adults getting involved group**

Formed in May 2015 to represent tenants aged 16 to 35, our main aims are to encourage young people to be involved with Housing Leeds, to hear about what matters to them about their home, identify barriers to communication and identify reasons for low satisfaction.

We are starting to engage with more and more younger tenants in different ways. We ran some citywide road-shows where lots of tenants told us they weren't really aware of Universal Credit and other Welfare Reforms that will affect them, and a priority for them is becoming familiar with how to calculate the benefits they will be entitled to. The first thing we have planned to try to tackle this issue is a live Twitter feed where young people who can post their questions and concerns and know that they will receive a quick response from a support officer.

The other priority for younger tenants is being more involved in decisions that affect them in their local areas. They don't feel that services tell them what is going on and don't ask for their opinions. We will keep talking to each other and meeting to discuss ideas about how the council and other agencies can get better at this. Some initial thoughts are around holding coffee mornings or workshops at the heart of communities.

This helps YAGi to focus on in its work supporting younger tenants, and will contribute to us achieving our main aim of improving tenant satisfaction of younger tenants across Leeds in the next STAR survey.

## **Repairs Focus Groups**

There are three area groups for repairs. The chairs of the groups meet to discuss cross cutting issues and findings.

In the South group we have provided feedback on a new version of the repairs handbook and the new system for collecting and managing repairs customer satisfaction data. We have also been consulted on and have helped change the rechargeable repairs procedures and we are planning some 'ride out's' with the gas engineers.

In the West group we have focussed on customer satisfaction, how feedback is collected and used to shape services, and the complaints process. We have interrogated performance data, particularly around void turnaround times, and will be looking at procedures for gas and electrical checks and testing and how these can be improved.

Some members of South and West have been involved in the procurement of new gas contractors.

The East group formed in September 2015. We have agreed that our priority areas of work will include the repairs budget and resources, communal repairs and empty homes.

### **BITMO**

BITMO's mission since 2014 has been to "Build a Better Future for Belle Isle". We have developed three core aims which are; maintaining a well-run organisation that is led by tenants and is open, transparent and financially viable, providing high quality services that focus on the organisation's key functions as well as other areas and building a stronger and safer community

We have ensured high levels of satisfaction amongst our tenants and have improved or Improved or maintained good levels of performance in key areas of our service.

Our service offer has been extended to help tenants into employment and provide training support through the Gate centre. We have also prepared for the challenges presented from welfare reform.

BITMO's key priorities include maintaining high levels of tenant and customer satisfaction, investing reserves into capital improvements on the estate, and continuing to develop and improve services in the face of the welfare reforms.

By being part of VITAL BITMO can give a perspective of how common tenant issues such as welfare changes and anti- social behaviour affect the people of Belle Isle and contribute suggestions for tackling these. It will also help to make sure that the key messages from VITAL are fed back to BITMO tenants.

VITAL welcomes feedback for the future from HAB on presenting its reports.