



Richmond Council's Tenants' Champion Annual Report

April 2019- March 2020



Councillor Jim Millard

I am delighted to present the Richmond Council Tenants' Champion report, following my second year in the role. It has been an even busier year, supporting tenants and leaseholders living in housing association homes in the borough who have had unresolved problems with their landlords. This is a report to tell you more about this and update you on important work I've been involved with to share good practice and improve the way both the Council and partner housing associations engage with their residents.

I would like to take this opportunity to recognise the significant and positive response that local housing associations, almshouses and charitable providers have taken in managing the consequences of the Covid-19 emergency, going that extra mile for communities they serve. This included contacting vulnerable residents and setting up hardship funds. I hope valuable lessons have been learnt about the benefits of such proactive working and the importance of keeping in contact with both residents and communities. Services that go beyond the bricks and mortar.

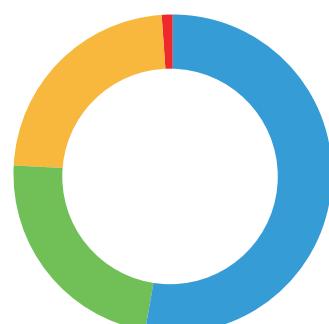
Listening to Residents

Building on these positive steps, close working between the Council, housing association partners and the voluntary sector to improve the ways social housing residents are listened to and engaged with needs to be a priority. For details of how Richmond Council has been working on this, see p.6

Households Helped

This year the Tenants' Champion service assisted 159 households (compared with 109 the previous year). Of these, 119 were new cases (compared with 93 last year). The balance consisted of cases from previous years that continued to require ongoing support. 26 of the new cases were forwarded to the relevant ward councillor to help in the first instance.

Of the new cases there were:



53% 83 Repairs	23% 37 Anti-Social Behaviour (ASB)	23% 37 Transfers	1% 1 Other (major works, service charges, parking)
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Working with Housing Associations and other partners

Residents from six different housing associations approached the Service for help this year. These included: Richmond Housing Partnership (RHP), Paragon Asra (PA) Housing, London and Quadrant (L&Q), Metropolitan Thames Valley (MTV), A2Dominion and Network Homes.

Twice yearly meetings have taken place with senior staff from the four main housing associations with the most homes in the Richmond borough – RHP, PA Housing, MTV and L&Q to enable staff and service updates to take place, review specific cases and to pick up on more general issues of concern.

This year I also made time to meet with the new manager at the South West London and St Georges Mental Health Trust, the director of the Council's Mental Health Social Care services and managers from Citizens' Advice. It is always beneficial to take time to understand different services and to secure a good working relationship with partners. This develops trust and can greatly help when problem solving complicated cases.

"I benefitted from meeting the Tenants' Champion in person. Doing so deepened my understanding of how services are organised and governed. It assisted me to develop productive and effective working relationships with key officials in the Local Authority and ensured our agency's contributions at the CMARAC were more pertinent and meaningful".

Simon Coningsby, New Clinical Manager for Adult Community Mental Health Services provided by South West London & St.George's NHS Trust.



Cllr Millard with Carol Julienne, Sharon Prospere and Priscilla Yeboah, L&Q

Casework Examples

1. Speeding up solutions – bringing people together.

A resident approached the Tenants' Champion service complaining about longstanding harassment to them, a single parent family with young children, which had recently escalated to criminal damage to property and threats of violence. The resident was too scared to live at their home and had moved to their mother's property on a temporary basis. Support had been received from the children's school and family midwife. The family were desperate to move in order to feel safer. Unfortunately, because it had been difficult documenting evidence of harassment and damage specifically at the property, the family remained in a low banding for a transfer.

The Tenants' Champion service felt that risk was high in this situation and quickly convened a meeting with the Council's community safety team, the local police team and the housing association concerned. Sharing information about what was needed by respective organisations resulted in the police writing a statement about the escalating risk to the family within a couple of hours of the meeting. This enabled the housing association to reassess the banding for a transfer – and their priority for moving was increased. The community safety officer suggested a CMARAC* referral, but happily this was not required. The increase in banding meant that the resident was very soon able to bid for and receive an offer of housing outside of the Borough. This case highlighted how useful it can be for round-table, joint-agency working and information sharing to take place in a timely manner.

* The Community Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conference (CMARAC) is facilitated by the Council's community safety team and deals with complex, often high-risk, cases where information is shared between agencies to safeguard victims and witnesses and prevent further victimisation. Cases supported by the Tenants' Champion Service continue to form part of discussions where there is always representation from the Tenants' Champion Service.



Cllr Millard with Peter Cogan, RHP, and Kay Willman, LBRuT

"Working with Cllr Millard not only gives us valuable insight into how our customers are feeling, RHP believe that a collaborative approach to case resolution is key in providing exceptional service. Cllr Millard's help in advocating for this way of working has enabled cases to progress to a quicker resolution and has provided invaluable reassurance to our customers of RHP's commitment to resolving their issues. We are grateful for Cllr Millard's hard work and support and we look forward to continually working collaboratively with him"

Peter Cogan, Executive Director of Customer Services, Richmond Housing Partnership

2. Neighbours with different lifestyles and life experiences not getting on

Sometimes the Tenants' Champion service can find itself supporting several people in a building or street that may be complaining about each other. This situation can be very fraught, solutions are rarely straightforward and generally require compromise from everyone.

As Tenants' Champion I take care to listen to each party as carefully as possible to make sure I understand the issues. It is essential to validate someone's experience as even if it appears unreasonable to some others, it is

how they feel about things, and can hold the key to understanding. Partial information can often lead to a knee-jerk reaction, whereas obtaining the fullest picture feeds into our central aim in such situations, which is to take as fair, impartial and balanced a view as possible. The Tenants' Champion service does not take sides but aims to communicate clearly any implications resulting from behaviours. The aim is always to appeal to people to behave in the best way possible to avoid further repercussions.

In an example this year, I learnt that a resident had installed their own CCTV camera in a communal hallway, because they were frightened of a neighbour. However, this breached privacy laws and their housing association had requested they took this down. The neighbour in question had their own story and felt unjustly harassed by the complaints. A further neighbour in the block, themselves vulnerable, had issues with each of the others in turn. When relationships have broken down to this extent, it can be very difficult to rebuild trust. Housing associations will often offer professional mediation to try and move things forward. Unfortunately, on many occasions one party will not participate. In this scenario I met with the Council's community safety team, the police and housing association with the result that the housing association agreed to install its own CCTV, within the guidelines, with the hope this would provide reassurance, and encourage good behaviour. If this failed to elicit a change in behaviour, it was agreed that other legal remedies might be progressed, such as a harassment warning, injunctions to stop the behaviour or to commence action against tenancies.

3. Spotting themes

Several cases this year involved repairs and service provision issues. Often this sort of case can be more straightforward to resolve – it is often clear if something needs doing and whose responsibility it is. Taking a wider view, the Tenants' Champion can often pick up themes of cases where more than one resident approaches the service about the same thing and this can be a sign of an issue with systems in some way, or perhaps an issue with a specific contractor or a housing association's approach to a problem

This year, with one of the housing associations this involved multiple complaints from different locations about:

- Roof leaks / repairs (specifically, in separate cases, several smaller patch repairs being undertaken with limited success, ultimately requiring a larger-scale repair)
- Concern about nonslip coatings to stairs failing
- Monitoring of parking enforcement companies
- Managing repairs for residents with additional vulnerabilities (including sensitively managing repairs to take account of health issues or using discretion where a resident is particularly vulnerable and may be unable to carry out a repair that is their responsibility.)

These issues are usually picked up with the senior management of the housing associations at the six-monthly meetings. The Tenants' Champion can highlight specific casework examples, giving the housing association a chance to review the situation. They can then answer concerns straight away, investigate further, and change practice if necessary. We have found that housing associations generally appreciate the scrutiny, which can enable them to improve services, benefitting both the landlord and our residents.

The Tenants' Champion Interagency Forum

The Tenants' Champion service works to encourage good joint-working practices with partners by hosting the twice-yearly Tenants' Champion Interagency Forum. This year a meeting was held in September 2019. Unfortunately, the meeting scheduled for March 2020 was cancelled at the last minute due to COVID-19 restrictions.

These meetings give an opportunity for agencies including the Council's community safety team, adult social services, housing associations, police, fire brigade, mental health services and voluntary sector organisations to share learning from the cases the Tenants' Champion Service has dealt with through the year and to discuss issues and themes that have emerged, where a joint approach can make a big difference.

This year some issues discussed have included:

- Ongoing discussions to update and streamline the Hospital Discharge and Mental Health Joint Working Protocols. These protocols are there to improve joint working and are vital in planning service delivery and response that prevent tenancy breakdown and provide reassurance to local communities.
- Regular service updates from each of the participants so partners understand each other's referral systems, ways of working and pressures – essential for joint working. The mental health social care team helped explain the role and referral system for floating support and supported housing and heard concerns

from the housing associations about residents who might not meet official thresholds but still needed support. Understanding potential gaps is essential to understanding what is needed to improve things.

- Briefings on the role of the Council's community safety team, how the CMARAC's organisation has been altered and its role in sharing information and creative working to find solutions in complex ASB cases. In addition, information about progressing work to investigate more tools such as Community Protection Notices and Criminal Behaviour Orders to help prevent ASB.
- Discussions led by Cllr Millard on the Council's report about 'Leading the Way in Resident Engagement'. The meeting that was due to take place in March (to be rearranged) was going to share different elements of good practice including:
 - The Council's approach to Resident Engagement
 - RHP's Leading Lights programme
 - MTV Resident Voice Coordinator role
 - PA Housing's 'Team Purple' approach



Listening to residents - leading the way on resident involvement

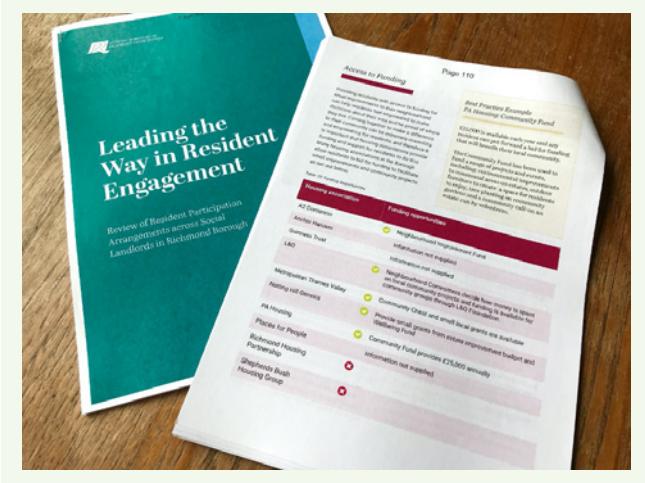
As a non-stock holding council, we are committed to working closely with our housing association partners to improve the ways both the Council and housing associations engage with social housing residents individually and collectively.

As the first step, this year the Council published a report - 'Leading the Way in Resident Engagement' - a review of resident participation arrangements across social housing landlords in Richmond. The purpose of this review was to identify and champion best practice in engaging with tenants, leaseholders and communities. It sets out expectations for our housing association partners and makes commitments on things the Council will do to support this work.

The report can be viewed here:

www.richmond.gov.uk/media/18679/resident_engagement_report.pdf

The report features easy-to-read at-a-glance tables so that any resident can clearly see what engagement methods their landlord currently offers. The comparison tables will be updated every year as an appendix to this report to reflect changes and improvements made by each housing association.



This review has involved the Council's Housing Policy and Performance team working closely with our Community Engagement team as part of our wider community engagement strategy. Our housing association partners have welcomed the report and representatives from the major housing associations with the most stock in our borough have committed to the next step. This will be to



Cllr Millard with Rachael Smart and Ian Watts,
PA Housing

form a working group to implement the findings of the report and explore new, creative ways to work together to ensure that tenant and leaseholder engagement in Richmond 'Leads the Way'. This unites with the Council's commitments to listen to, engage with and consult our residents and communities.

"It has been another successful and a very busy year working with the Tenants' Champion. Particularly through lockdown, where there have been numerous occasions where we've worked with the Tenants' Champion to try and achieve the best outcome for our residents who have not only had to deal with this challenging time but are also experiencing anti-social behaviour. We have worked with Cllr Millard to try to reach a resolution that is suitable for all those affected."

**Ian Watts Executive Director of Assets,
PA Housing**

Aims for the year ahead:

- 1 Continue to offer a Tenants' Champion service for Richmond Borough's housing association tenants and leaseholders
- 2 To host the twice yearly 'Tenants' Champion Interagency Forum'. This will include making sure the multi-agency Mental Health and Housing Joint Working and Hospital Discharge Protocols are working and kept up to date and facilitating any necessary training.
- 3 To continue to analyse themes, trends and volume in casework to see how housing associations' management practices are affecting residents and to promote good practice in key areas
- 4 Maintain a focus on seeking effective joint working to ensure that services are working well together, particularly with unresolved cases involving anti-social behaviour
- 5 Progress work to champion best practice in how housing associations engage with residents and work with them to ensure standards in the Richmond Borough lead the way.
- 6 Continue to report back with a yearly update on changes and improvements made by housing associations in tenant and leaseholder engagement as an appendix to this annual report

Resident Thanks

'I just wanted to thank you so very much for everything you have done, I'm quite sure this would not have happened without your help' EE

You've been a great help Jim', 'I've been listened to for a change', 'I really appreciate all the support there Jim'. PC

'We have greatly appreciated your communication and kindness throughout these testing 25 months'. LW

'May I take this opportunity to say thank you for all the time you have spent supporting us, organising the meetings and working to find a satisfactory resolution' PG

'Can I thank you for keeping me informed at every stage and supporting me in this matter in a very professional and human manner. Something becoming increasingly rare these days. It is very much appreciated by me' NM

'Thank you so much for all your help and support, it's much appreciated.' DS

'Thank you so much for your amazing support over the years. It's been quite a journey' RC

'I would like to thank you for your assistance during a period I found particularly stressful' CG

'Thank you so so much for managing to instigate change with my housing association on my behalf. The feeling of being trapped here has lifted and I feel a lot less scared because of that.' IS

'Thank you for your huge support over the past few months. You have been very kind to try to help me in this situation and I am incredibly grateful' KV

