

## **Scrutiny Question: How effective is the Newcastle Independent Tenant Voice (NiTV) in influencing social housing policy and service delivery in Newcastle?**

### **1. Why we chose to scrutinise this topic**

The Strategic Independent Tenant Voice was established in 2016 and is the way in which the Council and Your Homes Newcastle (YHN) involves tenants and leaseholders in the housing policy decisions of the Council and independent tenant scrutiny of Housing Revenue Account (HRA). It is made up of the Newcastle Independent Tenant Voice (NiTV), Scrutiny Involvement for Tenants (SIFT) and YHN's Customer Service Committee (CSC).

NiTV is the way in which the Council widely consults tenants and leaseholders on the Council's plans and policies which impact on housing and local communities.

In NiTV's Terms of Reference one of the first aims for the group is to ... 'consider the Council and YHN performance and service outcomes.' SIFT members became aware that none of the three parts of the Involvement Structure, namely SIFT, CSC or NiTV were directly receiving performance information and wanted to explore how effective NiTV were in achieving its aims.

### **2. Scope of the Review**

SIFT set a clear scope for the scrutiny, which is:

To identify the impact the NiTV has had on policy and service delivery in the last five years

To explore how effective the NiTV structure and operation is

To identify what incentive there is for tenants to join the NiTV

To assess the consultation on the Asset Management and Investment Plan

To recommend, where appropriate opportunities for improvements to the service.

### **3. How we scrutinised this service area**

During this scrutiny we completed a number of activities to gather evidence, these included:

A briefing by lead officers

Reviewing the Tenant Involvement and Empowerment Standard

Assessing NiTV Terms of Reference

Reviewing NCC's Tenant Involvement Strategy

Focusing on NiTV's activity in the last five years

Hearing the views of the Portfolio Holder for Housing on NiTV

Reviewing Service user feedback

Assessing key performance indicators

Assessing formal complaints and appeals.

#### **4. Equality Impact Assessment**

SIFT members considered the nine protected characteristics contained within the Equality Act 2010 to assess if any of them would be negatively impacted by carrying out this scrutiny topic. SIFT does not consider that any internal or external groups would be negatively impacted by the scrutiny.

#### **5. Factors to consider in completing the scrutiny**

- The briefing by the lead officers went ahead with only the officer from the Fairer Housing Unit (FHU), as the officer from the Communities Team could not attend the meeting.
- Service User feedback could not be obtained through a focus group as the Communities Team could not access the 'Facebook group' which had been set up to maintain contact during the Pandemic. The Information Communication Technology Department of NCC was asked to see if they could access the Facebook group, but could not because it was passworded by an individual. (See section 8 of the report).
- The consultation on the Asset Management and Investment Plan could not be assessed because the consultation had not started during the timeframe of this scrutiny.
- Unlike other social landlords NCC do not have a formal Tenant Involvement Strategy. What they do have is a document which sets out the purpose, aims and involvement offer of the Strategic Independent Tenant Voice.

#### **6. Briefing by Fiona Dodsworth, Partnerships Officer with the Fairer Housing Unit (FHU), 4<sup>th</sup> January 2022**

Prior to the briefing Fiona provided SIFT members with a PowerPoint presentation and a briefing note summarising NiTV activity for the last five years. This was to enable members to become familiar with the Terms of Reference of NiTV and how it was intended to operate.

Fiona stated that she will address the scoping document's Key lines of enquiry (KLE) within the briefing session. She said that she would forward further documents after the meeting which described NiTV's investigations into a number of topics, which she subsequently did.

#### **NiTV's Terms of Reference**

Fiona explained that the first KLE was around the NiTV's Terms of reference (TOR): she wanted to draw members' attention to the TOR's aims, the first of which discusses the NiTV's responsibility in terms of NCC's and YHN's performance and service outcomes.

The second aim details that members should have input into the design and outcomes of consultations and have input to the design and nature of service reviews. The aims also included that members be responsible for providing regular feedback to the wider tenant body through regular methods of communication, and that they should work in partnership to achieve improvements to services provided.

The aims also state that members should strive, through investigation, analysis and discussion, in a spirit of cooperation and collaboration, to achieve the best service performance and value possible. Members should also try to increase tenant influence in decision making and the strategic and operational development of services.

Fiona then went on to explore some of the background to setting up the NiTV. In 2016 the Fairer Housing Unit (FHU) set out a new approach to tenant involvement and this was around the involvement opportunities that the Council could directly offer, which focused on the NiTV and scrutiny.

A couple of points that Fiona wished SIFT members to take a note of was the intention of the NiTV Panel to look at SIFT reports and make comment on them. The Council wanted to take the focus away from formal groups and make consultation more flexible, as people did not often want to get involved with formal groups: the structure was set up in this way to provide more choice and flexibility around involvement. Fiona stated that the NiTV used a variety of methods to increase participation and be inclusive.

## **The Consultations**

Fiona gave a quick overview of the first consultation, which was about Independent Supported Living Accommodation. This consultation exercise was about asking the views of residents living in support housing for people with learning disabilities about their views and experiences of this type of housing.

The next consultation was about the Social Housing Green Paper, which was the precursor to the White Paper. What the FHU did to consult on this was to ask the views of NiTV Tenant Panel on the Paper so that officers could incorporate those into the Council's response to government. The FHU also encouraged members to respond to the government's consultation individually and assured members that the Council had no issues with that.

The third consultation related to Tyne and Wear Homes' annual review of the joint letting plan. This is really focused on data so what the NiTV did for this consultation was look at the views of customers around lettings.

The next exercise was to look at new build of council housing. The aim of this exercise was to make the Panel aware of how the development was financed. It was also to gather the Panel's views about what should be considered when developing a new site.

The last consultation exercise, which has not started yet, is the Asset Review. The purpose of this consultation is to gather tenant views on the Council's findings of the Review and some of the key issues which have been identified. As a consequence of the pandemic the consultation will be conducted digitally through a survey.

The FHU essentially commission the Communities Team to deliver the views of NiTV's members on the consultation projects. The FHU identify the projects and then provide the Communities Team with a brief for consultation. The Communities Team develops the consultation plan based upon the objectives contained in the brief, and then delivers the consultation.

Fiona stated that it would be useful for SIFT to talk to the Communities Team about the different ways they engage with people so that some of that good practice can be picked up within SIFT's recommendations for development of involvement and empowerment and how it could be applied to NiTV's working practices.

SIFT members asked Fiona if the impact of the consultations had been assessed, for example, what changed as a consequence of carrying out that consultation? Fiona responded that the individual managers of each consultation exercise would be able to provide that information. SIFT asked for the information to be provided in an impact summary.

After reading a draft of this report the Lead Officer, together with members of the Communities Team highlighted that several other consultation projects had taken place, involving large numbers of tenants. This information had not been disclosed when SIFT members first asked for the impact of consultation exercises.

## **7. Consultation Impact Summary**

### **Project 1. Independent Supported Living**

The findings covered:

- Social activities
- Safety
- Service performance
- Tenant engagement
- Building design (NiTV recommended a 'Gold Standard' for development).

Formal feedback was not received from the Lead Officer in two years. The findings will be reviewed by FHU to confirm what issues have been resolved and to consider how the FHU will apply the recommendations to new specialist housing schemes.

### **Project 2. Annual Lettings Review (ALR)**

In this review the NITV Tenant Panel focused on policy, services, and the IT system.

In terms of policy the NiTV recommended that the FHU should receive qualitative feedback in future reviews. However, the last ALR focused on a data review.

NITV Panel did recommend that they should be involved in developing a methodology for customer engagement in the ALR which the FHU has not yet progressed.

In terms of services the FHU are responding to the feedback except for a recommendation to include information on the local area and its suitability for household types when advertising properties. There are no plans to do this as the FHU think customers should be able to make their own decision.

An Extra Care Steering Group is exploring how the FHU raises more awareness of this housing option and have the following plans in place:

- Calling it Assisted Living to remove its association with residential care homes.
- An information leaflet has been produced.
- A dedicated officer in YHN's Housing Plus team is now in post for a 12-month trial period to provide advice and information, and support with the application process.
- Making care service users living in general needs housing aware.

IT changes need to be agreed by the Tyne and Wear Homes Partnership and consequently the FHU have not been able to implement some of NITV's recommendations. However, some of the concerns raised have been since addressed through the rollout of the latest version of the IT system.

### **Project 3. New Build project**

The project demonstrated the value of an ongoing dialogue with involved tenants to raise awareness of the City's housing needs, the Council's new build plans and the process for developing new housing. At the heart of this dialogue should be a better understanding of how plans are formulated, decisions are reached (including the compromises which sometimes need to be taken), how local communities may perceive plans, how we achieve greater trust and the wider community impacts of the Council's plans. It also highlighted the role of tenants in advising how meaningful engagement with tenants and the wider community can be achieved through better information sharing and accessible communication.

The FHU intends to work with the Panel to identify how they can act as a critical friend/provide challenge on issues such as site planning, building design and community engagement for future projects. The FHU would still like to progress this with a group of involved tenants and look at how it applies the lessons learnt to the Asset Review.

## **Project 4. Green Paper consultation**

Feedback from Tenants in the main was reflected in the Council's consultation response. However, it is not clear that the following issues were included:

- Ideas on how to engage tenants – but the FHU did say that engagement needs to be open and transparent and suit the audience.
- How tenants could be supported by their landlord to become homeowners.

Tenants also favoured league tables as they felt it was a good way to compare their landlord's performance. However, the FHU took the view that league tables do not consider variations in the operating environment of housing providers and what matters to their customers. It may be that the FHU needs to acknowledge a separate viewpoint in future consultations.

Tenants did say that consultations should be better publicised. There is no evidence that the FHU have carried out any further national consultations through NiTV.

### **8. Interview with a Communities Team member 25<sup>th</sup> January 2022**

(a) How many people are involved with NiTV?

The Communities Team member stated that right at the very beginning of establishing the NiTV, when the Communities Team launched the group, the innovative idea to make the event like a journey by plane was used. Invites to participate in the event went out on social media and the Team also contacted people they had previously been involved with and reached out to them.

Everyone who attended the event was given a boarding card with key information on it and then they went to baggage claim, where they were given further information and a passport, which they were asked to fill in information about themselves so that the Team could find out what they were interested in. The passport also asked if they were tenants of NCC so that the Team could check that the membership was made up of tenants and leaseholders only.

About 200 people attended the event and the Team got 52 responses from people stating that they wanted to be involved, from which about 15 people became Panel members and others became members of a wider supporting group, who could dip in and out of consultation topics.

Over time people slowly started to drift away from the group and that might have been because they wanted to talk about their own views and concerns that they have about social housing. The Team did support discussion around these issues but the purpose of the group was really to be strategic, it was more about amending policy and providing comments on policy and how things work. The Communities Team member stated that strategy wasn't the greatest subject in the world to talk about, it is quite dry, but at the same time there are still people out there who are interested in strategy.

So people dropped in, dropped out of the group and the Team ended up with about four people on the Panel who were completely involved in the role.

In answer to the question about how many people were involved the Team did amend the process when COVID hit by setting up a Facebook group which had 18 members and moved towards more digital communication.

(b) How do members get in touch?

The Team set up a website where members could get in touch and find out about the latest consultation exercise. There was also extensive use of social media to invite people to meetings and conferences.

Because of COVID the Team did not have any face-to-face Panel meetings from the start of the first lockdown up until the present date. The Team has not been in contact with the 18 members who are on Facebook for a while. The Communities Team member explained that the member of staff who set up the Facebook page had gone off on maternity leave in September 2021 and the access details had not been passed on, so members of the Communities Team currently are unable to contact the members by Facebook.

YHN did give the Team a list of contacts of people the Team may not have been aware of so that they could get in touch and encourage those people to get involved with NiTV. They were given a list of 9,500 people from YHN who they could contact, obviously observing all the requirements of data protection.

(c) How do NiTV decide what topics to look at through consultation?

The Communities Team member explained that the Fairer Housing Unit commissions the Communities Team to run a consultation with the NiTV on a particular topic. In the past couple of years the Unit has not asked the Team to hold any consultations, probably because of COVID. The consultation programme is driven by the Fairer Housing Unit rather than the membership of NiTV.

Before COVID the Team would meet face-to-face with the Panel to talk about issues affecting social housing at that time. They would go out to spread the word, put together newsletters on topical issues and promote information through social media, trying to get people interested to come along and take part. In between commissioned projects there were activities such as recruitment drives, promotional pop-up events and group visits.

Some of the commissioned projects were delayed, not through any fault of NiTV but maybe something to do with, for example, deadlines would change as a result of issues such as the democratic process, cabinet and amended project timelines.

The work the Team were commissioned to do through the Fairer Housing Unit wasn't flowing through all the time, we had a couple of regulars The Communities Team member explained, but once they were done and dusted the Team had to find their own topics to address. The Team took people on conferences and did things around involvement and engagement and we did training and development to build people's capacity.

The Communities Team member stated that at the beginning work flowed through thick and fast and at one point from October until one Christmas they had to have three consultation exercises on the go at the same time. From the Team's point of view that wasn't what they wanted to do, we wanted to get one finished before we moved onto the next topic. Deadlines would also change.

SIFT members stated that they thought there may be a tension between the Communities Team having to support NiTV and then during these times of COVID having to respond to the needs of tenants experiencing personal difficulties because of the Pandemic. The Communities Team member advised that Covid was a priority for the Council, as for everyone worldwide, and they were commissioned by Public Health to help during this time. NiTV always comes first and any project coming through from FHU would have been actioned. Contact was maintained with Panel members on a weekly basis until the resignations were received.

(d) How does NiTV monitor performance?

SIFT members stated that the first line of NiTV's Terms of Reference refers to monitoring performance of NCC and YHN and asked how performance information comes through to NiTV. The Communities Team member said that she would look into that and come back to SIFT on that issue (which she subsequently did, explaining that YHN's service performance information was not provided or examined by NiTV).

(e) What difficulties have you experience in setting up and working with NiTV?

The Communities Team member stated that the Team is guided in the work that they do through the FHU. SIFT members mentioned the current government consultation exercise on the national Tenant Satisfaction Measures which closed on 3<sup>rd</sup> March of this year. Members asked if the FHU had asked the Team to look at this. The Communities Team member stated that the Unit had not asked them to conduct any work on this.

(f) How do you ensure that diversity issues are looked at?

The Team has a comprehensive mailing and email lists specific to minority ethnic groups that have been collected over the many years by the Communities Team, they have a code of conduct and terms of reference that all panel members sign up to which refers to equalities in addition to adhering to the NCC equalities and Diversity strategy. We make sure we reach out to everyone; we make sure that when we do a survey at the end we ask about their gender, religion and where they live, for example, postcode. If we wanted to ask any additional questions, especially with Panel members we would say is there anything that you need, for example, because of a disability please let us know. We measure the information we receive in our monitoring and evaluation at the end of a consultation.



Not everyone would respond because some people are not happy with the questions, they don't want to disclose such personal information. We don't make it compulsory for people to complete the monitoring information; it is completed on a voluntary basis. We do say to people we are collecting this information so that we can identify if there are any gaps in the communities we are working in, are there particularly people we need to target if they are missing from our work.

We trialled, a long, long time ago a survey which made it compulsory to answer certain questions, so the question had beside it a statement which said 'requires an answer.' We got a lot of people who filled in the form until that bit but then just abandoned it, so a lot of surveys were completed to a point. So we then learned that we should not make a response compulsory.

We have a number of community groups from the Wards which we get from the Communities Team, for example the deaf community group, synagogues and a lot of different contacts. We do a lot of consultation exercises to make sure that we are absolutely inclusive of everybody in the city as much as possible. We tailor our work to our audience so that it fits, so for example, if it was the deaf community we would make sure we had signers, whatever is required.

(g) If you could have changed one thing about how the NiTV was set up or structured what would it have been?

At the beginning when the NiTV was set up we went over and above how much information we gave people and I think again, even now people still say what does NiTV do? I think if I was going to change anything it would be the way the purpose of NiTV was explained to people. I would make sure that we gave an absolutely clear explanation of what we do.

It is quite a niche subject that only certain people will want to be involved in. It is not a subject where everyone goes, 'housing policy and strategy, I'm dead interested in that.' There are people out there that are but it's not for everyone. I wouldn't change the purpose but I would provide more information about the process and where tenants and leaseholders can really influence pieces of work and legislation. You get some people who will still say, 'well it doesn't matter what I say they will still do what they want.' It is about how we will promote that they can make a real difference.

(h) What do you think has worked really well?

Incentives always work really well. If we give incentives it gets people involved. The Panel worked really hard and we had good conversations around the table. The members are really committed and they wanted to go out, they wanted to do visits and the Panel, even though there were low numbers worked well.

I think the engagement techniques we used worked really well. Coming from a community development background helped us to connect with people from different communities. We adapted our techniques to our audience and the techniques helped us to engage people.

We also have a very good relationship with the FHU so that there have been some really good pieces of work.

## 9. The Tenant Involvement and Empowerment Standard

This standard includes required outcomes with regard to:

- Customer service, choice and complaints
- Involvement and Empowerment
- Understanding and responding to the diverse needs of tenants.

This scrutiny project is focusing on the second bullet point, Involvement and Empowerment of NiTV and its members.

SIFT members feel that the terms 'involvement' and 'empowerment' have two very distinct meanings. Empowerment as a process is one that individuals and groups go through; empowerment means people having power and control over their own decisions and actions. Empowerment means that people are equal with those that they wish to engage with, they are respected, and confident in their views and beliefs, and have freedom of choice in the direction they wish to take. Other people cannot empower someone else, or make someone empowered, but they can support an individual in accessing skills and knowledge and help to build an individual's confidence.

Involvement is the act of participating in something, but the term itself does not ensure that the participation of each party is equal in power, control and access to information. Effective involvement is where the role of all parties involved are transparent and that options for action are decided upon by everyone involved, or if that is not possible then it is clear from the start of the project what the limitations are.

When applying the terms involvement and empowerment to the work and structure of NiTV SIFT members feel that it is clear from the interview with the Communities Team member that tenants were engaged in the projects, but they were not involved in selecting the topics they worked on. The FHU made the selection of topics, nor were NiTV members empowered to elicit an appropriate response to questions they made to one of the consultation lead officers.

The fact that the FHU did not commission NiTV to respond to the government consultation on the Tenant Satisfaction Measures indicates that there may be a disconnection between identifying relevant areas of activity for NiTV and the commissioning process.

The Panel members all resigned because they became frustrated with the lack of response from one of the consultation lead officers. They also felt that the scope of the Panel was becoming very narrow and this was demotivating and frustrating; if NiTV members had been empowered they may well have been able to resolve the poor response from the lead officer issue to their satisfaction. The resignations were also made because the Panel members received a letter from an officer in the Communities Team which members took objection to. The letter stated that NiTV when reviewing its aims and objectives should avoid duplicating the role of the scrutiny panel, that is SIFT, which members felt was too controlling.

The consultation exercise on the Green Paper may indicate that there is an unequal relationship between officers and NiTV members in that the tenants expressed the view that they liked the idea of ranking the work of social landlords, whereas the officers clearly disagreed with the idea and were able to submit that response to government. If the relationship had been equal then a full and transparent discussion should have been able to reach a joint conclusion, or alternatively, an agreement to submit two responses to the government consultation could be decided upon.

SIFT members concluded that NiTV, as one part of NCC's Involvement Structure does not appear to comply with the Involvement and Empowerment Standard in terms of empowerment.

**10. Councillor Linda Hobson (Housing Portfolio), views on NiTV**

**(a) Does she think that councillors are generally aware of the relationship between YHN and the Council and the need for both bodies to demonstrate that they are engaging tenants?**

Yes, I feel councillors are generally aware that the Council owns the stock and YHN manages it, and expect both organisations to provide opportunities for tenants to be involved and have their say about the services they receive. We have three councillors on the board of YHN.

**(b) Does she get regular updates about NiTV's work?**

I receive a copy of NiTV's Annual Report which details their activities over the past year and forthcoming projects.

**(c) Does she feel that NiTV are carrying out a useful role?**

I think the views of tenants and leaseholders help us to understand housing needs in the city and should inform our response. It is also important that we understand the impact of our policies, investment decisions and services on tenants, leaseholders, other customers and on communities.

**(d) Is there anything she would like to change about how tenants get involved?**

I think it is important that we continue to seek opportunities to improve for the reasons stated in the previous question. I do know that officers in the Fairer Housing Unit and the Communities Team intend to review how tenants and leaseholders get involved in the NiTV and I am very keen to understand how your recommendations will be responded to. It is also important that we understand the implications of the Social Housing White Paper for the NiTV involvement offer.

## 11. Complaints

Only one complaint was received which related to a meeting between Panel members and a meeting with the FHU. A formal conclusion was not reached before the Panel members resigned.

## 12. Conclusions

This scrutiny exercise was limited in scope because the proposed focus group with NiTV members could not be held because of access to the Facebook group.

The initial exercise to set up NiTV by the Communities Team was very successful, with a Panel of 15 members being recruited and 37 other tenants and leaseholders expressing interest in participating in the Voice.

Members of the Communities Team are community development specialists, and as such have a great deal of expertise in involvement, participation, engagement and empowerment. They are not social housing professionals and are not usually required to keep up to date with housing legislative changes or policy development. Therefore the Team is reliant on the FHU, whose staff are social housing professionals, to flag any housing activity that NiTV members need to be made aware of.

NiTV's workload is dependent on the FHU commissioning work for it. SIFT members were told NiTV had only undertaken four assignments, however at a later date members were told that other assignments had been completed: the results of which are variable in that some do not show any impact on YHN's service delivery or policy change, for example, responding to the government's consultation on the Housing Green Paper.

Membership of the group declined over a period of time. The lack of a clear stream of work for NiTV may have discouraged people from continuing to be involved in the group, as too was a clear demonstration of the impact the group was having on service delivery and policy change.

NiTV's Terms of Reference refer only to a 'Panel' of members, whereas in practice a Panel was established with a wider group of tenants and leaseholders at arms length from it.

NiTV's Terms of Reference clearly state that one aim of the group is to: 'Bring together feedback from tenants/leaseholders; **consider the Council and YHN performance and service outcomes.**' NiTV members have never received any information relating to performance and service outcomes. The fact that no part of NCC's or YHN's Involvement Structure receives performance information about how service is performing leaves a gap for tenants to see, transparently, how the ALMO is performing.

The Panel members all resigned in November 2020 and the 18 members at arms length became established as a 'facebook group.' The Facebook group was intended to overcome the face-to-face communication difficulties as a result of the Pandemic.

The Communities Team members lost contact with the Facebook group in September 2021 as the Team member who set up the group went off on maternity leave without passing on the password for access to the group.

The FHU did not commission NiTV to comment on the government consultation on the proposed TSM, which appears to demonstrate that there is a disconnect between the commissioning body for NiTV (the FHU) and the activity the Communities Team engage NiTV members in.

NiTV's branding appears to work well and has attracted a large membership in the past. The branding for attracting tenants and leaseholders to participate in the work of the landlord and management agent does not need to change, however its structure and operation needs to be strategically reviewed.

SIFT members concluded that if the intention of establishing the NiTV was so that NCC had a clear and consistent connection to the voice of tenants and leaseholders, and to hear their views on policy and performance on a regular basis, then the intention has not been achieved. The Council needs to review how it will connect effectively with its tenants in future.

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Recommendations	Management Response	Proposed Actions	Timescale	Responsibility
1. The FHU should conduct a strategic review of the NiTV platform with involved tenants so that the new structure should have clear purpose and objectives.				
2. The strategic review should consider the involvement mechanisms YHN have in place to avoid NiTV's role being duplicated.				
3. The remit of the restructured NiTV should not be too narrow or restrictive so that only a few people would be interested in it.				
4. The restructured NiTV should be established in the spirit of empowerment of tenants so that control is exercised by all parties equally.				
5. Once the strategic review is complete a comprehensive recruitment exercise should be conducted.				
6. The restructured NiTV should have a member of staff involved who has specialist social housing knowledge.				