

Motion to: Council

30 January 2024

Subject: Contacting the council and preventing maladministration

Proposer: Councillor Catt

Seconder: Councillor Young

Contact with the council through consultations and everyday communication is vital for the citizens it serves. Councillors have been made aware of many instances where this has been difficult or unsatisfactory, and has led to further issues for residents, especially those seeking urgent housing repairs.

This motion asks for a review and actions to make sure that all citizens are served and inequalities issues are addressed. Both the council and its citizens benefit from efficient, fair, and trusted two-way communication, and it is especially important that no one is left out of this process and that issues are dealt with quickly when problems arise.

In October 2023, the Housing Ombudsman published its Annual Complaints Review for 2022/2023, writing to all landlords who have a maladministration rate of over 50% to bring urgent attention to the figures. In this period, Norwich City Council was given a 100% maladministration rate, the joint highest of any landlord in the country.

In December 2023, the Housing Ombudsman, in a ruling against the council, found that Norwich City Council had failed to investigate complaints, had inadequate record keeping process and procedures, and in this case lacked empathy and was at times dismissive.

Council **RESOLVES** to ask cabinet:

- 1) To improve the mechanism and accessibility of consultations by:
 - a) Removing the requirement for residents to create an account or log-in when completing a consultation (ensuring that key demographic questions required for the consultation are collected in the body of the survey).
 - b) Providing a clear statement of intent with each consultation which explains how the results of the consultation and the data collected will be used (e.g. how will a majority of consultees objecting to the consultation change the plans).
 - c) Replying to each consultee with the results of the consultation after it has concluded and outline changes that have been made as a result of consultation returns.

- d) Avoiding the use of leading questions when putting together consultation surveys.

2) To improve engagement by:

- a) Having a plan showing how engagement data (such as the Community Connectors' data) is used before it is collected. This should include worked up logic mapping of how the engagement exercise will translate into tangible and measurable outcomes.
- b) Planning a clear impact evaluation of big engagement pieces before the engagement happens to enable objective evaluation of the impact achieved. Where possible, a progress evaluation should be included throughout the engagement.

3) To improve customer contact as part of the new customer and digital strategy by:

- a) Reviewing the provision of face-to-face appointments and the ease of requesting and being granted these appointments.
- b) Exploring the use of video appointments to enable the sharing of documents and a better assessment of the overall situation.
- c) Reviewing and monitoring the equalities impact of the customer contact and advice service.
- d) Ensuring that a clear warning is provided before a form times out, if the timing-out of websites cannot be removed as a feature
- e) Assessing the customer journey for a range of customer engagements, and conducting regular spot checks and mystery shopper exercises.
- f) Allowing for residents to book face-to-face appointments and report issues to the council by visiting City Hall, and aspiring to re-open the Customer Contact Centre.
- g) Introducing picture-proof confirmation of the completion of all requests through the street issue form
- h) Introducing a minimum timeframe in which tenants in the private rented sector can expect to receive a response following a Healthy Homes referral.

4) To improve communications with council housing tenants by:

- a) Reinstating regular Estate Audits and sharing the dates of these audits in advance with residents, councillors and other key stakeholders, and communicating action points from each audit to those stakeholders with clear timescales.

- b) Reviewing the tenant involvement panel to ensure it is representative of different kinds of tenancies and diversity of council tenants.
- c) Reviewing its repairs record keeping process and procedures for housing repairs.
- d) Update the tenancy agreement used by the council (as part of the next scheduled review), the 'Your New Home' booklet and council website with information about what might be considered an emergency or routine repair, timeframes for its response to any of these, expanding on information provided to give an equal focus on both resident and landlord responsibilities.
- e) Publishing the council's repairs policy on the Norwich City Council website.
- f) Committing to introducing a housing repair reporting system which allows tenants to schedule their own appointments.
- g) Ensuring that tenants are given adequate notice of where a repair case has been closed or a work order marked as completed with sufficient time given to challenge this if work has not been completed, or a tenant is not happy with the quality of work delivered.
- h) Ensuring tenants are contacted immediately upon the changing of an appointment.

5) To improve responses to complaints by:

- a) Achieving the set targets for responding to complaints in time within the next three months.
- b) Exploring automated progress updates to residents' enquiries and complaints.
- c) Exploring ways for residents to escalate reports and complaints that have had no or inadequate responses with the council.
- d) Committing to a review of complaint handling across the council, following a recent Ombudsman report which ruled that the council had failed to demonstrate it had investigated a residents complaint despite sending both stage 1 and stage 2 responses in a case of severe maladministration, and the Annual Complaints Review 2022/23 from the Housing Ombudsman which gave Norwich City Council a 100% maladministration rate.

6) To improve communication via letters by:

- a) Including a name, job title and telephone number of the person sending the letter.
- b) Adhering to readability best practice guidelines, or where that is not possible, including an easy read sheet.

7) To improve contact with contractors by:

- a) Ensuring that the council keeps an overview of work passed on to contractors and trials a system of being able to mark contractor work as completed and follow-up work that is not being marked as completed in a set time target.
- b) Ensuring that contractors are part of the 'no wrong door' policy
- c) Introducing picture-proof delivery of missed appointment cards being put through doors by NCSL operatives or contractors, to avoid disputes over whether properties have been 'carded' or not.