

MEARS



Mears Your Voice Customer Champion Forum: What does good practice in Scrutiny look like?

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Michael Hill, Business Development Manager, TPAS, Independent Chair

Moossa Yusuf, Mears Your Voice Panel

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Maggie Duke, Exeter tenant

Jacqui McKinley, CfGS

Gillian Yeoman, Mears Group

Annie Perk, Mears Tenant, Northamptonshire

Umme Ayfra, Tower Hamlets Tenant

Samual Komekech, Mears Your Voice Panel

Matt Williams, Mears

Mears have held the second session in our new series of customer forums which bring together tenants and experts to discuss key issues facing the housing sector. The topic for discussion this month was to ask experts and tenants what good scrutiny looked like and what they thought of the Mears' approach.

The forum welcomed speakers from TPAS, the Centre for Scrutiny and Governance, as well as feedback from our residents, and Your Voice Board tenant members.

We hope you will find lots of useful takeaways from this write up as well as links and reports to our partners' contributions at TPAS and CfGS

What does good practice in Scrutiny look like?

We need feedback from our customers to ensure our service is right for them. The Government White Paper has recently been published and will shape how the sector engages but Mears wanted to know how our scrutiny was viewed after a year of our new approach. Tracey Lyth, Head of Customer Success at Mears set out the results of our recent survey to our on-line forum. The key findings were:

What Mears do well?	What we need to improve
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Different areas of jobs that need to be done and different jobs to be done straight away. • Asking for feedback and hearing from customers proactively • Being open to feedback • I think the presentation is well done • Investigating ongoing issues with repairs and faults. • Involving the service users and the wider community • Listening to their customers • Staff are professional and friendly. • They are interested in tenants' views and take these into account when making decisions. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A phone call or email would help • Asking for feedback on loads of things • Being open • By listening to tenants and following guidelines. • Hold meetings with staff and tenants alike to bring more awareness to scrutiny. Provide staff with necessary training. • Be transparent detailing achievements, problems and learning. • The standards that are used for scrutiny should be the same whether it's a private customer or council / HA tenant. • By reviewing feedbacks from customers and learning from mistakes. • More information.

The Mears Approach – Jacqui McKinley

Mears wanted to develop and enhance their scrutiny. Mears has had a long-term record of customer experience. It has to be about making service improvement – influence and impact. Jacqui McKinley, Chief Executive of the Centre for Scrutiny and Governance set out how she had worked with Mears to develop their approach to scrutiny.

We created three 'Your Voice' involvement mechanisms



Mears Customer Scrutiny Board – An independently chaired panel of customer representatives working alongside the PLC Board and providing oversight, challenge and support to Mears. It will be supported, and its independence assured by the Centre for Governance and Scrutiny.

Mears Customer Forums – Thought leader and tactical based virtual forums that challenge and shape current and future thinking, bringing together influencers, clients, customer professionals, key stakeholders, residents and community activists. This forum will create a link between the Scrutiny Board, our online network and scrutiny structures and will be supported by TPAS

Mears Online Customer Network - A virtual online network of residents from around the country, who opt into providing feedback on our services - provide insight into what's important and what's not - offer opinion and suggestions - validate and endorse our thinking/new initiatives.

Applying Best Practice

The Mears approach has now been in place since February and Jacqui explained what lessons we had learned so far:

- Drawing on best practice from all sectors
- Senior buy-in and access all areas
- Part of formal governance – reporting into the PLC Board and a publicly available annual report
- Independently supported and chaired with access to Mears team and external advisers
- Recruitment of diverse group based on a range of housing, personal and professional experience and paid a 'fee' of around £1000 a year
- Induction to get enough understanding to ask the right questions and add value

Lessons so far

- Lockdown restrictions – meant shorter, more frequent meetings
- Finding the right scrutiny method – task groups working best so far
- Senior involvement – at the right time
- Areas of focus – customer communications, journey map and call centre experience. Aiming for both real time and strategic impact
- Challenge of getting the different involvement elements working together
- Annual report and Board PLC interest – focuses the mind on impact

Dave Mckenna, on Research Report: Successful scrutiny for Council Tenants, on behalf of TPAS

Dr Dave Mckenna shared his thoughts on what effective scrutiny looks like and provided the forum with resources from the research report produced and published on behalf of TPAS in July 2020. The purpose of this report is to help support council tenant scrutiny in England.

The report draws on 19 interviews including with national experts and people directly involved with four local case studies. Interviewees include tenants, councillors, participation officers and housing managers.

About the author Dr Dave Mckenna

Dave is an independent consultant and researcher who helps councils and other public bodies

with training, research and improvement work. He is an Honorary Research Fellow at Swansea University and an associate with the Centre for Public Scrutiny, the University of South Wales and the Institute of Local Government Studies. He has over twenty years of local government experience including as a scrutiny manger and tenant participation officer.

TPAS 2020 Scrutiny Principles

- Independent: Tenants lead and own the scrutiny process
- Inclusive: Scrutiny is independent and connects well
- Positive: The organisation encourages and supports tenant led scrutiny
- Constructive: Scrutineers are “critical friends”
- Purpose: Scrutiny makes a difference

Successful Scrutiny for Council Tenants - Research

Dave gave the forum insight from research into Hull, Croydon, NW Leicestershire and Swindon Councils and their experience of scrutiny– these can be applied to all scrutiny forums whether private sector, housing association or local council:

Keys to success

1. Learning and development - Tenants have the knowledge skills and confidence they need
2. Support and resources - Tenants have what they need to be effective and aren't out of pocket
3. Relationships and respect - Trust and mutual appreciation help to ensure a constructive relationship
4. Organisational culture - All officers are responsive to tenants and the organisation is committed to tenant engagement
5. Role and recognition - Scrutiny has a clear and understood role in the decision-making structures for housing
6. Scrutiny process - A consistent and robust approach is in place for in-depth scrutiny work
7. Senior buy-in - A supportive and positive culture is led from the top
8. Access to information - Tenants have the information they need to pick topics and reach conclusions
9. Recruiting and retaining - Processes are in place to help find and appoint new members who are the right fit for tenant scrutiny
10. Keeping in touch - engagement structures are in place that help scrutiny to hear from a wide range of tenants

Michael Hill, Business Development Manager for TPAS

Michael spoke to the forum on the top tips for effective scrutiny as discussed with Clive Betts MP, Chair, Communities and Local Government Select Committee at TPAS' Scrutiny week:

- 1. Don't be afraid to innovate.** Embrace new ideas to gather evidence, think about going out and talking to people, use social media, look at citizens' juries and roundtables. Scrutiny can be done digitally – maybe not as well in some circumstances – but it enables us to carry on and it does work well. Be careful not to exclude those who are not digitally enabled, and sometimes if interviewing those who aren't that willing to give information, it's easier to challenge when you're with them face to face in a room.

- 2. Be independent.** The scrutineers should choose the topic and decide what to scrutinise. They must have complete freedom in this – it's their decision and no one else's! However, they can look at topics in response to organisational business – so for example when the Government publishes the white paper, this will be scrutinised by the committee. Also, scrutiny can be stimulated by an event such as the Grenfell Fire tragedy.
- 3. Reach out to more people.** Don't just rely on the usual suspects –use fewer formal methods – see tip one. Allow people to contact you to tell you about the issues that matter. People can write to us to ask us to look at subjects to scrutinise and we have been more varied in gathering evidence, so we go out visit places, and talk to people. For example, we went to meet young people to hear about their experience of the homelessness services. Also, important to keep in touch with key groups such as Grenfell United.
- 4. Track recommendations.** Have learnt that when people say “that's an interesting idea”, what they really mean is, “we're going to go away and forget all about it”. It is therefore vital to follow up scrutiny and keep asking “you promised to do this, what have you done?” The report is not the end of it, keep pushing and follow up.
- 5. Make people feel comfortable.** People will feel differently about being invited to take part in scrutiny evidence gathering, so need to make them comfortable and may need to treat them differently depending on who they are, so for example there will be members of public who haven't been to parliament and we need to make them comfortable so they open up.
- 6. Don't be afraid to challenge.** There's nothing wrong with critical reports, sometimes you do need to say “you have to do better, or do this differently,” as scrutiny is meant to be helpful. The more capable people take it in their stride and see the positives. Others who are less confident or capable don't, and may get defensive.
- 7. Do your prep.** Read papers beforehand and do research as you need to know something about the subject you are reviewing. You can't be an expert but need to know enough to know if you are being fobbed off and so you can't be “blinded by science.”
- 8. Use experts.** There are people out there who will be willing to help and advise you on subjects. For example, universities have a lot of experts who will help free of charge.
- 9. Learn good questioning techniques.** Remember don't give your own view before you ask the questions. Be persistent and do ask the same question in a different way if you aren't getting an answer, it might be they haven't understood the questions. Do suggest if they don't know the answer, they can give it to you later in a written response.
- 10. Don't be fobbed off.** Tenants are the experts – they live in the properties. Don't be afraid to stand up to professionals and do not accept any fobbing off.

Question and Answers

Moossa Yusuf, Mears Your Voice Panel: As a member of the Board, the incentive scheme is compensation for continuous involvement – the idea was new to me, but it was about critical evaluation throughout. The question was how do we make things better? This was inspiring from a profit-making company – extra mile.

Jacqui McKinley, CfGS: We did think about payment, but it is about fairness when there is a company around the table. It also encourages new people and recognising their time.

Moossa Yusuf, Mears Your Voice Panel: Scrutiny boards should never place conditions on payment – you should be free to criticise

Umme Ayfra, Tower Hamlets Tenant: I joined because I was having a difficult time with the council – you raise an issue through the council who then pass it on to Mears. The council system allows you to provide your availability – for instance avoid school runs – they have come during this time. Really frustrating. Council needs to match up with Mears. Sometimes hard to get in touch with Mears. Are Mears reviewing this?

Tracey Lyth, Head of Customer Success, Mears: Contractors don't have one standard approach and we have to respond to how the council works. Mears preferred route is to handle the whole customer journey. This resonates as we need to listen. Mears can take this back to the council to see how we can work better together. We now use text messaging which allows customers to respond to Mears to arrange a re-appointment. This isn't feeding through to you, so we need to look at specific improvements.

Samuel Komekech, Mears Your Voice Panel: The Scrutiny Board has picked this issue up and will be making recommendations in December – communication needs to be improved. It is not always consistent but Umme should know we are working on this as a board.

Moossa Yusuf, Mears Your Voice Panel: The Mears Scrutiny board has discussed concerns about scheduling and has been able to look at different options. It is important for Mears to be flexible. Mears have introduced an application to track the operative for tenants to see when they will arrive. It is also important for customers to have an option to speak to a human being – especially if they aren't able to use technology.

Tracey Lyth, Head of Customer Success, Mears: Solutions should be on-going throughout the lifetime of a contract – so important that we continue to push and ask what good looks like.

Michael Hill, TPAS: Some forums can become dysfunctional if people are bringing personal issues to the table which skew the conversation – this should be dealt with offline. But if lots of people are saying the same thing then organisations have to listen.

Samuel Komekech, Mears Your Voice Panel: Mears has been innovative; however, the innovation needs to be communicated to the customers better; whilst alternatives for those that are not technology savvy should also be to the same standards for consistency.

Tracey Lyth, Head of Customer Success, Mears: We need to communicate what we are doing and ensure solutions work for everyone – not one size fits all.

Maggie Duke, Exeter tenant: I had an appointment cancelled by Mears and when I phoned no one was able to help me. No one explained that the appointment would be cancelled. Miscommunication when you call Mears' office.

Tracey – Thank you for sharing your experience – this is not what we want to have happen. I will take this back to the Exeter team to understand what went wrong and how to improve the system.

Annie, Balmoral Place: Where I live, I've experienced Mears management changes, not kept informed or communicated with and we've received no services at all which we pay for. I had a meeting with the new area manager about getting a window cleaner.

Gillian Yeoman, Customer Development Manager, Mears: We have a number of actions to work through on Balmoral Place – please stay on board and join our scrutiny board –

Annie, Balmoral Place: Scrutiny is very helpful – good to hear from other tenants and what their issues are. Most useful.

Tracey Lyth, Head of Customer Success, Mears: hearing negative things is the point of scrutiny – we have to hear about what it looks like where you live. We will be talking to you locally to try to resolve these issues.

Recommendations for review and consideration for Your Voice Board:

Overall, the forum was happy with Mears approach and recognised it as good practice and in order to enhance even further would make the following recommendations:

1. Define and implement a Mears Approach to Scrutiny policy
2. Define Scrutiny Training framework
 - Board Member training – consider TPAS
 - Good practice in scrutiny training – develop and deliver to defined colleague group
3. Define and implement an effective approach to communication for scrutiny work:
 - MUST report back to individuals and wider group on the resolution of any issues. How can we make this more available to a wider audience? Publish on social media? Send out to YourVoice Online Panel for reading?

You can find the reports mentioned in this write up attached – we hope you found our second forum useful for your own organisation.

Please look out for our next forum meeting which will focus on the recently published White Paper on Social Housing which will be held on December 10th.