On Wednesday 4th October 2023, a small group of us went to Loughborough University for the Tpas Scrutiny Conference.

Tpas are national tenant engagement experts , and held a variety of workshops throughout the day to help us think about how we do scrutiny at Greatwell Homes, and to learn some tips on how to improve. The conference opened with a session from the Regulator for Social Housing, to talk about the new consumer regulations. They asked us how we think our own organisations are performing against these new regulations, and how the regulator is making changes to get a thorough view of how organisations work and how they meet the new regulations.

The workshops we attended in the morning were ‘Essential Skills for Scrutiny’, ‘Where is Scrutiny at?’ and ‘Scrutiny in a New Regulatory World. Amanda said about the Essential Skills workshop “I found it interesting.  I will take with me the tips like asking the right questions to get direct and relevant information.” Andy attended the Regulatory World workshop, and said that the Customer Assembly started looking at the Social Housing Green Paper and White Paper years ago – these are the document that ultimately informed the new regulations. Customers from other organisations in this workshop said they are only just starting to look at this now, so we are more up to date and doing better that some other landlords.

Sharon and Gemma attended the Where is Scrutiny at workshop. In small groups we discussed whether our scrutiny group is doing enough to make a difference. Similar to Andy’s findings, Greatwell Homes’ scrutiny team are doing really well compared to some other organisations. Another customer in this workshop with us said “we’re not where you are, but we’d like to be” which is a very reassuring comment that tells us we are doing well at scrutiny. Sharon says “we are well organised and continue to make tweaks to how we do scrutiny”.

The afternoon workshops we attended were ‘Showing the Value of Scrutiny’ and ‘Scrutinising Repairs and Maintenance’. Sharon and Andy attended the Showing the Value workshop. They heard about the difference ways other scrutiny group produce their scrutiny reports. Sharon and Andy are pleased with how they write their own reports and feature photos, diagrams, charts, quotes and infographics to make their report more colourful and engaging. Some scrutiny groups do not write their own reports and there were discussions about how independent these scrutinies felt.

Andy said “I learned about another organisation that uses videos in their scrutiny report. I want to find out more about this and see if this is something that we can do”. Andy also said he would also like our scrutiny team to shout more about what our scrutiny reviews achieve, for example linking our scrutiny page on the website to social media posts so that more people will see.

Amanda and Gemma attended the Repairs and Maintenance session. Amanda said “it was great to hear about the problems encountered with other organisations like how some have delays in repairs and how lack of communication causes concerns with tenants.” Our customers often highlight that communication could be improved at Greatwell Homes. Gemma noted a couple of points from other organisations around stock condition surveys not being thorough enough (for example, wall insulation might be in place but is it good enough quality); low response rates on satisfaction surveys so performance data doesn’t reflect the majority of customers; and having an appointments systems that keeps pace with other industries such as parcel delivery services that show when the driver is on route and how many stops away they are.

The closing session of the conference was a scrutiny showcase featuring customers from four Housing providers across the country. Sharon represented Greatwell Homes up on showcase panel, and told everyone about our Shared Ownership scrutiny review from earlier this year. Sharon went on to say that the Shared Ownership manager was very vocal in her praise of the experience with the scrutiny team. She told other managers how positive her experience was, and they managers could feel reassured that the scrutiny team is a helpful resource to make positive changes.

Some organisations take a year to complete scrutiny, whereas others prefer a one-day bootcamp style. Some scrutiny groups have an independent tenant advocate, and some are happy for staff to write the scrutiny report from customers’ research. We learned from the other organisations that there is no ‘one size fits all’ approach to scrutiny.