

# Tenant Engagement Strategy

2024-2028

Draft

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## **Joint foreword** by Portfolio Holder for Housing and Homelessness, and Involved Tenants

Cllr Steve Davies, Portfolio Holder for Housing and Homelessness says.

I very much know from my own role as a New Forest District Councillor that the emphasis on engagement and co-creation of strategies, services and policy design with tenants has changed significantly over the last few years, quite rightly culminating with the Charter for Social Housing Residents 2022 and the subsequent Social Housing Regulation Act 2023.

I am very keen that this new legislation, not only bolsters our Tenant engagement Strategy, but renews the Council's commitment to delivering positive engagement, in all forms, with our tenants, leaseholders, staff and other stakeholders.

The housing sector has had to learn the hard way from both tragedy, and the feedback of tenants across the country. We have always been ambitious and passionate about a continuous journey of improvement for our housing service, so I am very supportive of a clear strategy that sets the tone of a renewed engagement approach and is a real driver for cultural change in delivering on our strategic promises, in partnership with our tenants.

This strategy aims to put our tenants at the very heart of our Housing Services, setting out how they will have a clear role in engaging with, shaping, and scrutinising our services – holding us to account and ensuring the best outcomes for our tenants, the communities in which they live, and for the Council's housing services.

I am pleased that our strategic actions have been co-produced with tenants, and our staff, to ensure everything we aim to achieve is supported by the tenants' voice, and those who will implement the actions.

In my role as Portfolio Holder for Housing and Homelessness, I am excited to see how we encourage new tenants to get involved, what new feedback we receive and how we use that feedback to continually improve our service. An exciting journey lies ahead.

Cllr Steve Davies

## **Foreword from Alex Elliott & Alaine Willis – Members of the Tenant Involvement Group**

### **Alex Elliott of Totton**

“Staff at NFDC work day in, and day out to deliver good, high quality housing services to tenants who live within our district. However, in the past tenants haven't always had a big enough say in how the council delivered those services. I'm excited this published tenant engagement strategy shows how seriously NFDC takes what their tenants have to say and to put them on an equal footing alongside staff members. Social housing regulations are changing all the time, but tenants and their voice will continue to be needed to be heard, no matter what changes, so I would urge any of my fellow tenants to get involved.”

### **Alaine Willis of Holbury added:**

“It's great to be part of the effort New Forest District Council makes to engage with their tenants in a respectful and caring manner. Whilst many things have changed over the years, this has always been for the better and I feel that now is another opportunity to continue our journey, with tenants being involved in implementing the changes. As we used to say.... We have a voice... and it is good to know that we have been heard.”

## National Context

National Housing regulations and nationally responsible bodies such as the Regulator of Social Housing and Housing Ombudsman prescribe that a decent and safe home for tenants, receiving quality services that are important to them and their communities should be at the core of any social housing service. Yet, over the last few years national news headlines have prominently featured many tragic cases of those living in Social Housing experiencing apathy and, in the very worst cases, fatal consequences of poor housing conditions, or a failure to act on critically important feedback or a call to action from tenants.

As a result, there has been intense scrutiny and resulting government policy, guidance and legislation that are all relevant to this strategy and beyond. Fire safety, damp and mould, social housing stigma, inequality and racism, lack of engagement, skills and experience, and traditional and unhelpful views on what it means to be a 'social housing tenant' have all been called out in recent years, highlighting a need to change, to do better, and to evolve with a modern and diverse world.

Via the Regulator of Social Housing the Government took charge, publishing 'The Charter for Social Housing Residents – Social Housing White Paper' in 2020 which set out the Government's clear expectations for social housing providers.

In it they set out 7 clear priorities:

1. **To be safe in your home.** We will work with industry and landlords to ensure every home is safe and secure.
2. **To know how your landlord is performing,** including on repairs, complaints and safety, and how it spends its money, so you can hold it to account.
3. **To have your complaints dealt with promptly and fairly,** with access to a strong ombudsman who will give you swift and fair redress when needed.
4. **To be treated with respect,** backed by a strong consumer regulator and improved consumer standards for tenants.
5. **To have your voice heard by your landlord,** for example through regular meetings, scrutiny panels or being on its Board. The government will provide help, if you want it, to give you the tools to ensure your landlord listens.
6. **To have a good quality home and neighbourhood to live in,** with your landlord keeping your home in good repair.
7. **To be supported to take your first step to ownership,** so it is a ladder to other opportunities, should your circumstances allow.

The Regulator has received greater powers to ensure the highest standards of housing and services are delivered, which are further bolstered by the Social Housing Regulation Act 2023, and a revised set of Consumer Standards to be finalised later in 2023 setting out the detailed regulatory expectations of landlords and revised electrical and Decent Homes Standards, along with the legal requirement to have senior decision-making officers qualified to designated levels.

The Housing Ombudsman Service has also strengthened their approach and now their responses to failings and best practice feature prominently. The stronger relationship they

have with the regulator closes feedback loops, with failings identified by the Ombudsman leading to real change expected by the Regulator.

The introduction of a new Tenant Satisfaction regime from April 2023 requires data collection against 10 management performance measures, and surveying of tenants for their views against 12 perception measures. Tenants will be asked about how well landlords engage, listen and respond to them.

Landlord performance data will be published in the Autumn of 2024 in national league tables allowing for meaningful comparisons to be made across the sector for the first time.

However, The Regulator of Social Housing has been clear, that our focus should not only be on meeting prescribed standards– it remains firm on landlords doing the right things for their tenants.

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## Local Context

Our tenants and the communities they live are an ongoing priority for this council, which is supported by the themes in our new Corporate Plan 2024-2028. We are keen to promote opportunities to gather feedback from our tenants as we look to continually improve and evolve our services.

We have previously operated a very traditional model of tenant engagement, based around a formal engagement with a central group of tenants, which is in need of review and a refresh. Through a very narrowly focussed offer to become involved with the Council our tenants may be unaware of the possibilities and opportunities to get involved, so we need to ensure we make available, and publish, a range of options for tenants to interact with us, in ways that suit them and make them want to work with us.

The Housing Ombudsman has highlighted the need to 'know our tenants', to truly provide and tailor services important to individuals and communities.

Whilst we need to improve our outward facing communication and information, we also need to ensure we engage with tenants who represent the diversity of all of our tenant needs and backgrounds, with a data collection exercise informing the design of our engagement approach and future service reviews.

NFDC already have an engaged, enthusiastic and well represented Tenant Involvement Group (TIG). However, the members of the TIG have told us that there is more to do to engage with our wider housing communities and enable a wider tenants voice to influence and inform our Housing Services.

Alongside this, it is clear in the current wider housing landscape, we can do more to ensure that our tenants have a voice that is heard not only by all our front-line housing services, but also across all levels, including in the governance structures, of the Service. That 'tenant voice' must be representative of the NFDC tenant population, and the communities in which they live.

Both the Ombudsman and Regulator make it clear that one of our priorities needs to be focused on knowledge and information management. Not only do we need to review the data we need to collect and hold, concerning our tenants and their household makeup (to enable a true understanding of our tenants, and ensure services are accessible and meet their needs) - but we also need to ensure that information is relevant to our tenants and services, and is easily accessible to enable transparency and accountability. It is important to stress that NFDC do not need to hold information that is not relevant – however, data which can inform our community makeup, will help drive and build better services for our tenants, and will enable us to measure the success of engaging with those communities to ensure fair and transparent representation.

In turn, this will enable effective communication between our tenants and teams, acknowledging that times and expectations have changed. We need to have a wide range of communication methods and the ability for tenants to hear about how we're performing and what's important to them. We need to make it easy for tenants to tell us about those important subjects, feed into our key activities that affect their lives, and feel genuinely involved in a partnership with NFDC.

The following key priorities will influence our approach to tenant engagement over the next 4 years and will be measured for success based on the 'key measures of success' highlighted on page 15 – reviewed annually (and periodically during each year).

**Our vision and strategy are built on 4 strategic priorities.**

These priorities are aiming for real, meaningful impact for both tenants and NFDC services. Our priorities will be reviewed regularly/annually by both tenant and colleagues to make sure we're on the right track and can be dialled up and down depending on what our tenants tell us as we progress with implementation.

Every tenant will be enabled to have a voice – but not every tenant wants to be part of a focus group or give up their time. We'll make it easy for our tenants to work with us, whatever their circumstances or needs. Enabling tenants to shape and improve our services through effective implementation of our priorities.

Within this strategy references to 'Tenants' includes general rented and leaseholders. And for the avoidance of doubt, this strategy is specifically for the tenants of New Forest District Council, as a landlord, and their communities.

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## Achievements to Date

**The Social Housing Regulator made it very clear not to wait for the SHR Bill to become law before acting on the changes required. Equally the Council has not waited for the implementation of this strategy before embarking on the delivery of key actions, which have been:**

- A renewed focus on Scrutiny of our services, with the Tenant Involvement Group (TIG) being able to challenge and review our services through a monthly Service Manager's update.
- The introduction of a new Tenant Engagement Manager role to continue to drive a focus on the tenant voice and support New Forest District Council to meet the requirements of the Social Housing Regulation Act.
- A Governance and Scrutiny Review completed by the TIG, feeding directly into the proposals within this strategy.
- Implementation of a new Housing Management system – allowing us to better record and report on our customer data.
- All housing teams given regular briefings on the Tenant Satisfaction Measures and new regulatory regime – to increase awareness and in preparation for renewed focus.
- The procurement of a digital platform that will allow digital participation and consultation on NFDCs project. Enabling and supporting co-production and to support listening to Tenants' views.
- A group of our involved tenants participated in the consultation on both the proposed Tenant Satisfaction Measures and Decent Homes Standard review.
- Tenants helped us review our Void Standards and policy, plus monitored our progress against the policy by carrying out spot checks of our empty homes.
- Tenants helped us review our new Mobility Scooter Policy.
- Established new surveys to obtain tenant satisfaction with the handover of properties and completion of repairs.
- Supported one of our TIG members join the national Social Housing Quality Residents' Panel
- Ensured leaseholders are consulted regarding the procurement of contractors ahead of maintenance schemes taking place in their respective buildings.
- Introduced 3 new Building Safety Officer roles to provide a renewed focus on the upkeep of blocks of flats, whilst allowing for tenant feedback on safety issues to be recorded.
- Developed a dissatisfaction and tenant feedback process using the new housing management process.
- Published our self-assessment against the Housing Ombudsman Complaints Code.
- Developed a range of performance and budget information to be published in an annual report.
- Improved the level of safety information provided to tenants.
- Increased the use of social media and press releases to make our residents aware of housing service initiatives.
- Ensured tenants received effective engagement during major works projects, involving decanting to alternative accommodation at Compton House, Sarum House and Robertshaw House, as well as during the installation of 120 Air Source Heat Pumps.



## Priority One: Listening to our Tenants

Our tenants are best placed to tell us what's working well and what we can do better. A wide and diverse range of Tenants must have opportunities to have their voices heard regarding the services they receive and any significant changes we wish to implement, with a clear line of sight to the Governance structures of the Council.

We will

- Establish a clear offer to tenants on how their voice can be heard, by establishing a menu of engagement opportunities to encourage a diverse set of feedback. This will include:
  - Establishing a structure for Individual tenants, groups, or tenant associations to feed into formal scrutiny and decision-making processes.
  - A review of the functions of our operational teams to ensure we have a presence in our communities and neighbourhoods
  - Neighbourhood, rural and community outreach sessions
  - Street and Village Meets
  - Activities that support breaking down barriers and provide community cohesion, whilst providing opportunities to capture tenant feedback as a secondary aspect to the event
  - Digital forums and surveys
  - Transactional surveys e.g. following a repair completion, or closure of an ASB case
- Establish a protocol for appointed tenants to work alongside the Portfolio Holder, appointed Members of the Housing & Communities Overview & Scrutiny Panel, and senior officers to support co-creation, scrutiny and feedback on performance.
- Ensure tenants are aware of their local Councillors and Portfolio Holder for Housing and Communities and their ability to raise issues with them regarding the services they receive.
- Implement a clear structure for active tenant accountability and feedback, with recruitment of specialised project groups to scrutinise and co-produce/co-create policies and strategies.
- Establish Tenant involvement in the procurement of housing services and contractors that affect tenants, and ensure the same principles of tenant engagement are embedded and monitored within those procured services.
- Encourage a diverse and well represented collective tenant voice.
- Ensure service feedback and dissatisfaction provided by tenants is recorded electronically and escalated appropriately for action and long-term change.
- Ensure information to support tenants to make corporate complaints and report repairs and ASB is easily accessible.

## Priority Two: Putting Tenants First

We will work with our employees to reinforce accountability at all levels of our service. We want to work in partnership with tenants to collectively improve services and outcomes for both tenants and our teams.

We will:

- Encourage ownership and accountability of services and actions required by our employees - from the top down – ensuring this is a focus for Members and Directors/Service Managers through the design of strategies and policies, regular briefings and the inclusion of feedback in service design.
- Ensure that Tenant feedback is a standard agenda item for tenant facing services (through team meetings, toolbox talks and 1:1 meetings).
- Ensure the tenant engagement team are involved in projects and policy/service re-design that will affect tenants.
- Provide regular training, webinars and/or briefings to staff, to ensure good practice and relevant legislation is embedded within our Housing Services.
- Continue to drive a culture of equality and fairness through data driven feedback, policy design, staff inductions and training. We will challenge negative perceptions and prejudice through education and highlighting 'the lived experience' of engaged tenants.
- Establish a partnership approach with Tenants where we actively build relationships and empower tenants, our staff, and Council Members to work together and pro-actively challenge poor service.
- Build on a culture of collective accountability by encouraging cross-department working.
- Establish partnerships with key agencies in the district who will support us deliver key priorities and deliver on their own strategic priorities for the benefit of our tenants.

### **Priority Three: Knowing our Tenants and Supporting Engagement**

Record keeping and data management is a crucial part of listening, understanding and responding to our tenants, whilst also informing service design. When we get this right, our tenants will receive a quality service that will be trusted. We need to know our tenants to provide services that are important to them and be able to respond based on the needs of those tenants. Without quality data, we can neither respond well, nor can we develop a truly tenant first approach – and at worst, risk being non-compliant with several regulatory expectations.

We will

- Undertake an initial review of our customer data, making sure it is both up to date and relevant - recording data on protected characteristics and housing needs.
- Undertake a survey of tenants and their households to collect information relevant to future service design, including personal characteristics and household needs.
- Only collect data that is meaningful, up to date, and relevant. To this end, we will periodically review the data we hold, and complete data cleansing exercises where needed.
- Embed a data integrity ethos with customer facing teams, which also follows data retention schedules.
- Ensure our performance framework adopts the ability for service and tenant feedback to help shape improvements and outcomes for tenants.
- Aim to focus engagement activities in community areas and on specific services where needed.
- Ensure that all customers have equal access to engagement opportunities and having their voice heard.
- Understand the needs of both our own tenants, and other residents in our neighbourhoods and communities to help shape improvements that matter to them and in the places where our tenants live.
- Embed how tenant characteristic data and performance data feeds back into service design and improvement.
- Make it easy for our teams to use, share and update data that is relevant to their roles, to support effective customer service.

## Priority Four: How we Communicate with Tenants

We know that effective communication is key to the success of not only this strategy, but for tenant engagement and the effective delivery of our services and compliance against regulations. If we do not make it easy for tenants to hold us to account, or make the information they are looking for easy to find and transparent, or we make it difficult for our employees to close feedback loops – then we will be challenged to make any of our tenant engagement priorities work.

We will:

- Enable a range of communication methods that meet customer need including:
  - o Outreach in our communities, such as community hubs
  - o A digital platform to increase the number of consultation opportunities, project engagement and feedback.
  - o Online communication channels via social media/Digital communication
  - o Increased access to customer facing teams through an increased presence of staff in our communities, neighbourhoods and buildings.
  - o Invitations to feedback on services received, such as reactive repairs
  - o Annual surveys and Tenant Satisfaction Measure perception surveys
  - o Improved website information and self service
  - o Publications and subject related guides and leaflets
  - o This will include an assessment of fully accessible methods of communication which are available to tenants with disabilities and other characteristics which require barriers to be removed to allow access.
- Be consistent with our communication style/brand. This will be non-judgemental or 'stigma creating', that promotes equality, diversity and inclusion.
- Keep tenants updated on the services that are important to them, using channels that tenants have told us works for them.
- Promote positive outcomes and good practice, including positive tenant feedback – building trust with our tenants and teams.
- Agree customer standards for response times to phone calls, email and other feedback.
- Acknowledge complaints and tenant correspondence within specified targets and keep tenants informed on the progress of their enquiries.
- Communicate relevant Health and Safety information, tenant responsibility and building specific information to the residents that live there.
- Communicate effectively with new tenants before they become our tenants and early on in their tenancy to ensure expectations are understood and tenancy support identified.
- Ensure our services are responsive to communicating new and emerging issues e.g., Damp and Mould.

- Where issues arise or things go wrong e.g., communal boiler breakdowns, contact all affected tenants following a new agreed response and feedback plan.
- Ensure that all Leasehold Section 20 consultations are undertaken where required, and that these are effective and compliant both legislatively and following best practice.
- Communicate effectively with elected Members and/or other advocates working on behalf of tenants to help resolve matters raised. Where it is not possible to meet their expectations we will explore alternative options and be honest with what we can achieve or provide.

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## **Implementation and Delivery**

To meet these four priorities, we will take a flexible approach to tenant engagement – with a range of options to engage that can flex based on customer need. We will outline our formal approach to meeting these priorities in our action plan in Annexe 1. We will implement this with a mix of proactive, responsive, and structured engagement to achieve ‘diversity of voice’, and we’ll make it easy to engage however and whenever suits our tenants.

### **Proactive engagement**

- Outreach
- Surveys
- Online consultation
- Service reviews
- Day to day Housing activities

### **Responsive engagement**

- Complaints
- Dissatisfaction
- Tenant or Community specific issues

### **Structured engagement**

- Tenant Advisory Board/Tenant Gateway
- Panels
- Groups
- Performance reporting
- Partnerships with Communities and other agencies

### **Outcomes and actions**

Our engagement activities and commitments in Priory 1 – Listening to Tenants will raise an increased level of feedback from tenants, leaseholders, residents, partner agencies, staff and Members. It will be important to collate this feedback and ensure this learning is used to continually evaluate services and the actions within this strategy.

As a landlord the Council will be held accountable for its positive contribution to local neighbourhoods. It is therefore important that this strategy not only commits to engagement with tenants, but also residents, other landlords and agencies with a responsibility in local communities, such as the Police, Community Safety and the County Council.

In line with our values, we aim to deliver the following outcomes against the Council’s values by the end of the strategy term:

**We trust each other & reinforce this with mutual respect** - our tenants will trust us and will work with us to inform and improve our services, and we will put things right when they go wrong. We know how important our tenants’ homes and communities are - we’re in this together and for a common goal of quality homes and services.

**Communication is key & your voice will be heard** - we will talk, listen and understand each other. We will make it easy to hear each other and respond to things that matter. Our aim is to ensure an equitable tenant voice, with no group or individual being underrepresented or excluded (no one's opinion/thoughts is amplified over others) - every tenant has a voice if you want or need to be heard.

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## Monitoring and Governance - Key measurements of success

The outcomes of the strategy and the work programme will be under continual monitoring and review. Updates to Members and the Council's Executive Management Team will be provided at least annually.

The tenant perception surveys carried out each year will provide valuable insight in to how satisfied our tenants are. It is accepted that there are some quick wins that can be implemented, whilst other changes will take time. Annex 1 allows us to flex our approach and timescales, but the aim will always be to achieve the priorities in this strategy before the end of 2028. The priorities that our tenants tell us mean the most to them will be our focus.

Our key measures of success will be:

### Quantitative

- Improved satisfaction performance year on year following on from the initial set of Tenant Satisfaction Survey Perception Surveys in 23/24
- Improved satisfaction performance from service surveys year in year
- Reduction in the number of stage 1 and 3 complaints received from tenants compared with the 23/24 financial year
- Reduction in the number of disrepair claims compared with the 23/34 financial year

### Qualitative

- By December 2028 there will be a clear direct line of sight from tenants to the Portfolio Holder for Housing. Tenants will tell us that they are able to directly influence and scrutinise our services (measured by feedback from our Tenant Governance Structure and tenant surveys).
- Tenants will have access to/be provided with accessible meaningful data to judge our performance.
- Our teams and tenants will tell us our tenant data is up to date and accurate.
- Learning from complaints will be embedded into service design and re-design.
- Tenant Feedback will tell us where we are not getting things right. Our aim will always be to listen, understand and resolve complaints though to a mutually agreeable outcome.
- We will see and be able to demonstrate a diverse mix of proactively engaged tenants which represents our wider tenant makeup. If part of a formal group, we will be able to measure this via our tenant data and tenant population. However, we will also accept anecdotal feedback (for example if we are completing an online consultation and tenants are not required to provide specific personal data).
- Customer facing teams will tell us/be able to demonstrate improved services or tangible outcomes from tenant engagement activities – be that individual, or community based.
- We will be able to publish success stories and positive feedback from tenants (you said, we listened).
- Tenants will have access to digital portals to give and receive feedback. This may include our own website or a hosted site. The measurement of success will be take-up, engagement in projects, or website 'footfall'.
- Streamlined processes, reduced incoming queries – better operational quality will be demonstrable.



## Annexe 1

Priority	Action Required	Lead Officer	Target Date
Priority 1	Create our offer to tenants - our engagement structure	Dave Brown/Joy Stainer/TIG	Mar-25
Priority 1	Establish 'outreach' programme or face to face engagement	Dave Brown/Joy Stainer	Apr-24
Priority 1	Establish a protocol for appointment and terms of reference for tenants & governance	Joy Stainer	Mar-25
Priority 1	Recruitment of 'Involved Tenants'	Joy Stainer	Mar-25
Priority 1	Creation of Panels (procurement; complaints; ASB; neighbourhoods etc)	Dave Brown/Joy Stainer	Mar-25
Priority 2	Produce a programme of Managers & Cllrs Briefings – agree rollout	Dave Brown/Joy Stainer	Mar-24
Priority 2	Ongoing – Tenant Engagement Manager update at monthly meetings/toolbox talks	Dave Brown	Ongoing
Priority 2	Consider and implement Engaged Tenant shadowing opportunities	Dave Brown/Joy Stainer	Mar-24
Priority 2	Plan and implement Tenant Engagement Roadshow opportunities with other partners/stakeholders	Dave Brown/Joy Stainer	Mar-25
Priority 3	Initial data review and data collection project – to ensure current tenant data is up to date and accurate	Dave Brown	Apr-24
Priority 3	Data review programme – ongoing programme for front line teams and services.	Dave Brown/Laura McIndoe	Apr-24 & ongoing
Priority 3	Review and act on feedback - rolling programme	Joy Stainer	Ongoing
Priority 3	Establish measures for success through feedback	Dave Brown	Dec-28
Priority 4	Promote our visibility on estates	Dave Brown/Bryan Byrne	Mar-25
Priority 4	Utilise and report on the success of Citizen Lab	Dave Brown/Sophie Tuffin	Apr-24

Priority 4	Review and create a Tenant Engagement page on our Website & consider increasing our social media presence	Dave Brown/Joy Stainer	Sep-23 & ongoing
Priority 4	Review Hometalk - ensure relevant	Joy Stainer	Apr-24
Priority 4	Create feedback culture - set up pulse surveys for services	Dave Brown	Mar-25
Priorities 1, 2, 3 & 4	Tenant perception Surveys - Collection and reporting	Dave Brown/Sophie Tuffin	Apr-24
Priorities 1, 2, 3 & 4	Review new Consumer Standards & complete gap analysis	Dave Brown/Joy Stainer	Apr-24
Priorities 1, 2, 3 & 4	Ensuring scrutiny through involved tenants	Dave Brown/Heads of/Service Managers	Dec-28
Priorities 1 & 4	Organise an attractive and fun event (or events) to encourage tenants to participate alongside neighbours or fellow tenants, and celebrate being an NFDC Tenant	Tenant Engagement Team	Summer 2025 and potentially ongoing