

# HOUSING AND COMMUNITIES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL – 17 JANUARY 2024

## PORTFOLIO: HOUSING AND HOMELESSNESS

### TENANT ENGAGEMENT STRATEGY

#### 1. RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1.1 That the panel note the Council's updated proposed new draft Tenant Engagement Strategy and consultation outcomes, providing comments for consideration by Cabinet.

#### 2. INTRODUCTION

- 2.1 This report presents the Council's draft Tenant Engagement Strategy. This is a new Strategy produced in response to The Charter for Social Housing Residents – Social Housing White Paper in 2020 and the Social Housing Regulation Act 2023. Due regard has also been given to latest guidance and best practice and it has been co-produced with housing practitioners and tenants. The proposed Strategy is attached at Appendix 1.
- 2.2 The original draft Tenant Engagement Strategy has been reviewed by the Tenant Involvement Group, the Executive Management Team, the Housing and Communities Overview and Scrutiny Panel, and Cabinet in October 2023 to seek approval to launch a formal four-week consultation process.
- 2.3 Consultation is now concluded and the Strategy has been designed with an aim for the Cabinet/Council to formally agree and adopt the Strategy in February 2024.

#### 3. BACKGROUND

- 3.1 The Charter for Social Housing Residents – Social Housing White Paper published in 2020 set out the Government's clear expectations for social housing providers, with 7 clear priorities:
- i. To be safe in your home.
  - ii. To know how your landlord is performing.
  - iii. To have your complaints dealt with promptly and fairly.
  - iv. To be treated with respect.
  - v. To have your voice heard by your landlord.
  - vi. To have a good quality home and neighbourhood to live in.
  - vii. To be supported to take your first step to ownership.
- 3.2 The Regulator for Social Housing has received greater powers to ensure that the highest standards of social housing services are delivered. This is supplemented further by the requirements of the Social Housing Regulation Act 2023, including a revised set of Consumer Standards currently being consulted on and anticipated to be finalised later in 2023, which sets out the detailed regulatory expectations of landlords. The Regulator of Social Housing has also been clear that landlords' focus should not only be on meeting prescribed standards, but also on doing the right thing for their tenants.
- 3.3 The Housing Ombudsman has highlighted the need to 'know your tenants' to truly provide and tailor services important to individuals and communities. To that end the

Council needs to ensure that it is reviewing the data it needs to collect and hold relating to its tenants and their household makeup. There is also a need to ensure that information is relevant to the Council's tenants and services and is easily accessible to enable transparency and accountability.

- 3.4 The Council currently has a traditional model of tenant engagement based around formal engagement with a central group of tenants making up the Tenant Involvement Group (TIG). This Group have been able to influence many aspects of what the Council do. They understand there is more to do to engage with the wider housing communities and enable a wider tenants' voice to influence and inform the Council's Housing Services. The Council need to make available a range of options for tenants to interact with the Council's housing services in ways that suit them and which recognises their diversity.
- 3.5 The Housing Service is committed to improving outward facing communication and provision of information, and ensuring engagement takes place in a way that represents the needs of all tenants, with a data collection exercise informing the design of the engagement approach and future service reviews.
- 3.6 It is clear in the current wider housing landscape the Council can do more to ensure that tenants have a voice that is heard not only by all the Council's front-line housing services, but also across all levels, including within the governance structures of the Housing Service. That 'tenant voice' needs to be representative of the Council tenant population and the communities in which they live.
- 3.7 The effectiveness of the Strategy will depend on good communication between tenants and the Council. There is a need to have a wide range of communication methods and the ability for tenants to hear about how housing services are performing and what is important to them. The Council needs to make it easy for tenants to feed into the key housing activities that affect their lives and feel genuinely involved in a partnership with the Council.

#### **4. KEY COMPONENTS OF THE STRATEGY**

- 4.1 The Council are proposing to build a vision and strategy on 4 strategic priorities as follows:-
  - 4.1.1 **Priority One: Listening to our Tenants.** Tenants are best placed to tell the Council what is working well and what can be done 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 the Council wishes to implement, with a clear line of sight to the governance structures within the Council.
  - 4.1.2 **Priority Two: Putting Tenants First.** The Council will work with employees to reinforce accountability at all levels of the housing service. The Council wants to work in partnership with tenants to collectively improve services and outcomes for both tenants and teams working within the housing services.
  - 4.1.3 **Priority Three: Knowing our Tenants and supporting engagement.** Record keeping and data management is a crucial part of the Strategy and the Council's tenant engagement approach. The Council needs to know its tenants in order to provide services that are important to them and be able to respond based on the needs of those tenants. The Council also needs to ensure compliance with the requirements of the regulator and Housing Ombudsman expectations.
  - 4.1.4 **Priority Four: How we Communicate with Tenants.** Effective communication is key to the success, not only of the strategy, but for Tenant engagement and

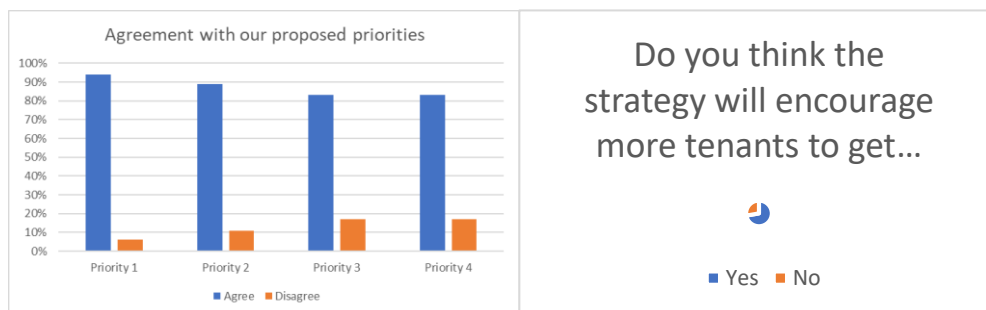
employee buy-in. The Council needs to make it easier for tenants to hold the housing services to account and make the information they are looking for easy to find and transparent.

## 5. CONSULTATION DETAILS AND OUTCOMES

5.1 Consultation ran from 16 October 2023 to 20 November 2023 (a total of 5 weeks) and was promoted via a mix of social media campaigning (3 rounds of posts on Facebook and LinkedIn); posters put up at schemes and distributed via the Tenancy Management Team and online promotion of the ways to take part via our online participation platform, Citizen Lab. We also took the opportunity to actively speak with people at the hubs and encouraging participation via word of mouth.

5.2 Tenants, practitioners and stakeholders were all invited to take part in the consultation and were enabled to do so in person at each of our 5 hubs, digitally on Citizen Lab, by phone and email. A total of 18 people took part in the consultation (13 online & 5 in person).

5.3 The majority of those that took part in the consultation either strongly agreed or slightly agreed with each of the Councils four proposed priorities and 72% felt the Strategy would encourage more tenants to get involved with the Councils Housing Services, as shown in the charts below:



5.4 General feedback via comments was either positive, or focussed on existing performance dissatisfaction, which this Strategy aims to address. However, general comments noted:

*"I feel the tenants would engage more, as they would feel they are being listened to and especially if we put the strategy in place and do follows up and ask for feedback".*

*"More actual interactions face to face NFDC to be in attendance at events and carnivals and perhaps drop in options around the New Forest".*

*"This strategy is full of good ideas, but the practicalities will show if it works. It will need successful measurements and a want to build trust".*

*"Rubbish title - would prefer 'tenants have your say. Also need to make sure that individuals don't dominate tenant involvement, and become overpowering".*

*"This will be good once in place but people struggle with online/zoom etc. so email or phone calls are better in my opinion. This is all very well in theory. It will be good to be implemented".*

*"Amazing strategy. Hopefully it gets into action so tenants can see and feel they are involved and listened to".*

## **6. CONCLUSIONS**

- 6.1 The proposed Tenant Engagement Strategy supports the Council to deliver on new regulatory requirements and expected consumer standards arising from the Social Housing Regulation Act. This will place the tenant, their needs, and importantly their voice at the heart of the Council's Housing Service.
- 6.2 Following recommendations from EMT, the Strategy has been amended to:
  - 6.2.1 Include an earlier reference to the four strategic priorities (within the Foreword).
  - 6.2.2 Give more deliverable timescales within the annexed action plan.
- 6.3 It is proposed that the Strategy now be adopted without further amendments given the support it has received from Involved Tenants, Members, and staff, alongside the positive feedback from the consultation exercise.
- 6.4 The proposed Strategy will be presented to Cabinet in February 2024 with a final report being provided to Council later that month.

## **7. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS**

- 7.1 Budgets for the Tenant Satisfaction Surveys and the data collection survey have been approved previously by EMT and Cabinet/Council in 22/23.
- 7.2 There is a likelihood for future implications on existing budgets within the Housing Revenue Account due to an increase in tenant feedback. However, any changes, service redesign and introduction of new and additional processes will be actioned within existing budgets as natural efficiencies are created.

## **8. CRIME & DISORDER IMPLICATIONS**

- 8.1 Whilst there are no direct crime and disorder implications arising from this Strategy, it is anticipated there will be potential indirect and positive impacts on the Council's tenants and neighbourhoods.
- 8.2 Through successful implementation of this Strategy the Council will see an improvement in partnership working with Tenants and local partners, such as the Council's Community Safety Team and the Police in the reporting, investigation and resolution of Anti-Social Behaviour in local communities.
- 8.3 Increased feedback and communication mechanisms may also highlight new and emerging issues relating to crime and disorder which will allow the Council to plan and respond appropriately.

## **9. ENVIRONMENTAL IMPLICATIONS**

- 9.1 There are limited implications and environmental impact arising from this strategy. However, employees will give due regard to positive impacts on the environment when conducting activities that require travel. The introduction of digital engagement methods will reduce travel, production of mail and other publications.
- 9.2 Environment and sustainability will be considered alongside any specific Tenant Engagement project or activity.

- 9.3 Improvements in neighbourhood and community appearance would also be expected as a result of this strategy. Increased engagement and understanding what is important to tenants should lead to estate improvement ideas being raised, considered and implemented – ‘placemaking’ and estate improvement being a tangible outcome that can be measured.

## **10. EQUALITY & DIVERSITY IMPLICATIONS**

- 10.1 There are several actions in the strategy which relate to diversity. The Council is not currently in a fully informed position as to the personal characteristics of its tenants and their household members. Therefore, a key action is to undertake a full personal data survey of tenants to better understand who is occupying the Council’s homes. This survey will also capture additional needs and support required by the Council’s tenants.
- 10.2 This information will be used to better understand the needs of the Council’s tenants and how services should be designed in future to meet these needs and to ensure services and engagement is fully accessible to all.
- 10.3 With full accessibility in mind the strategy supports establishing several methods of tenant communication and engagement. 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.

## **11. DATA PROTECTION IMPLICATIONS**

- 11.1 The collection, retention and deletion of Tenant data is governed by GDPR and associated guidance. The Housing Ombudsman has also given a clear direction on expectations for data collection and data handling. There are clear and legitimate reasons for the Council to hold and process data and sensitive data relating to tenants to enable delivery of the services that are provided. However, all data will be collected and maintained in line with the required legislation.

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### **Background Papers:**

Published documents