

Appendix 1

Tenant Engagement Strategy

Hearing our Tenants' Voice

2021-2024

Housing Service

2022 Review Version

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Foreword



Councillor David Godfrey, F&HDC Cabinet member for Housing, Transport and Special Projects

I believe that the people living in the homes the council provides have the best insight into what they need from their housing service. The district includes large rural spaces with towns and villages, as well as densely populated urban centres. It is important that our tenants and leaseholders living in these areas have a range of opportunities to share their knowledge and experiences with us. Our aim is to work in partnership with tenants to improve the housing service, making a positive difference to you, your neighbourhood and the wider community.



Elaine Bostock, Chair, Strategic Tenant and Leaseholder Board

I joined the STLB for many reasons anti-social behaviour, tackling the stigma associated with being a council tenant, supporting the vulnerable, helping to reduce crime, improving the local environments and ensuring quality services and value for money.

Tenant engagement gives us tenants a bigger profile and louder voice that the council must listen too. We act as their moral compass to do the best for all tenants.

Being part of the creation and consultation process of the Tenant Engagement Strategy means that I have been able to oversee and work in partnership with F&HDC and the Tenant Participation Advisory Service (TPAS) in putting together a realistic and relatable strategy that will benefit the tenants and put us (the board) in a position to oversee and hold to account, when necessary, the senior management of the housing service, We will also have regular, open communication from our councillor and fully ongoing support for tenant engagement, in order to carry on our

responsibilities as tenant and leaseholder board members for our district. I have been the chairperson for many years now, but I'm still learning - even with lockdown and COVID, tenants still need us in their corner improving their homes and environment.



Andy Blaszkwicz, Director of Housing and Operations

This strategy sets out Folkestone & Hythe District Council's commitment to engage with our tenants and leaseholders (collectively referred to as tenants in this document) and involving them in the decisions which affect their homes, local communities and the delivery of the housing service.

Understanding the changing needs and aspirations of our tenants is vital if we are to deliver a truly great housing service. The council has developed this strategy jointly with tenants to ensure that the variety of opportunities created for genuine engagement include things that interest them, are accessible to all and take into account different lifestyles and availability to participate. We look forward to working with our tenants and encourage everyone to get involved.

Introduction

About the Housing Service

Folkestone and Hythe District Council (the council) provides just over 3360 affordable rented homes in the district and manages 215 leasehold properties, as well as a small number of shared ownership properties. In October 2020 the Council established a housing management service to manage these properties.

Vision

The vision for the housing service is 'To create a world-class, digitally enabled service that is easy to do business with and where tenants are at the heart of everything we do'. This includes providing a range of inclusive and accessible engagement options at every level. We want to use people's individual and collective skills to shape and build the service and future of affordable housing in the Folkestone and Hythe district.

This three year Tenant Engagement Strategy has been developed to fulfil the current and future expectations of the council, its tenants, the Regulator of Social Housing and central government.

Strategic Priorities for the Council

This strategy and the customer centred aims of the housing service are directly linked to the ambitions outlined in the Council's Corporate Plan for 2021-2030, 'Creating Tomorrow Together'. The plan has four service ambitions:

A Vibrant Economy: Focus on attracting investment into the area, adapting to changes in the economies of local business and high streets in the area to increase employment, aspirations and the success of local businesses.

Quality Homes and Infrastructure: Ensure better access to a wider choice of high quality homes for all residents in the district, embracing sustainability.

Positive Community Leadership: To support and contribute to the health and wellbeing of residents. Addressing inequalities of access to resources and welfare services between communities, such as education, transport and health provision.

A Thriving Environment: Providing and maintaining open spaces and investment in green infrastructure to enhance our natural environment. Part of this is the aim that council services will generate net zero carbon emissions by 2030.

The work undertaken to achieve these ambitions will be driven by six key principles, which include continuous improvement, and a commitment to be transparent, stable

and accountable. The work we do alongside tenants in the delivery of the housing service is all part of the optimistic plans for 'Creating Tomorrow Together'.

Regulatory Requirements

Regulator of Social Housing Standards

There are four consumer regulatory requirements that housing providers must adhere to. For the purposes of tenant engagement the council must follow the requirements of the Regulator of Social Housing's Tenant Involvement and Empowerment Standard 2017. The following are the three required outcomes for all social housing providers:

- Customer service, choice and complaints
- Involvement and empowerment
- Understanding and responding to the diverse needs of tenants

The standard underpins the principles of co-regulation and tenant engagement. Co-regulation means that councillors are responsible for ensuring that their landlord services are managed effectively and comply with all regulatory requirements. The council must also support tenants to shape and scrutinise service delivery and to hold councillors to account where standards are not being met.

The Charter for Social Housing Tenants

The government 2020 white paper 'The Charter for Social Housing Tenants' was produced building on the lessons learnt from the Grenfell Tower fire. The part of this document that is important to tenant engagement is 'to have your voice heard by your landlord'. The key themes are that:

- Engaged tenants should be a key part of any landlord's governance and customer-led assurance arrangements.
- Tenants who don't want to attend formal meetings or join a formal group need to have ways to feed back to their landlord to ensure their voices are heard and their needs are identified.
- Engagement opportunities are tailored to tenants' needs and interests, encouraging and supporting greater involvement

This charter also enforces that information should be published and available to tenants on how their landlord is performing in key areas of service delivery.

About Tenant Engagement

What is Tenant Engagement?

Tenant engagement is a term used to cover many different activities within a housing service through which tenants can contribute to how the service is delivered. As part of its vision the council will ensure that tenants are provided with a range of flexible options for involvement and engagement at different levels, which include both formal and informal settings in person and on line.

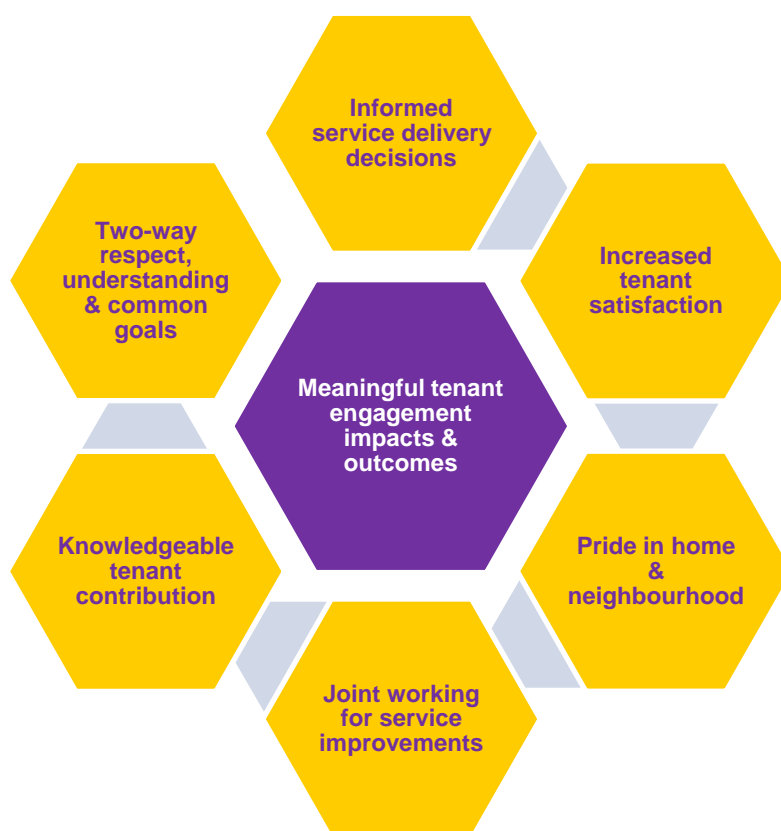
Key Elements of Effective Engagement:



The council is creating ways for tenants to participate in engagement activities safely; supporting tenants to learn and explore new ways of working and communicating to ensure engagement thrives.

Impact & Outcomes of Meaningful Engagement

Effective engagement reaches all tenants, not just those already involved, ensuring everyone has opportunities to contribute. It is not only about what tenants can tell us about their housing experience and needs, but also about giving tenants an understanding of what a housing provider must consider when delivering the service. This exchange of information promotes meaningful engagement, realistic expectations, as well as better decision making, which improves outcomes and value for money.



The knock-on effect increases customer and staff satisfaction, of pride in a person's home, neighbourhood and workplace, leading to a sense of place within the community. Good engagement is built on mutual respect and the council has an enormous appreciation for the dedication shown by the StrategicTenant and Leaseholder Board over the years, and for the experience and knowledge of its members. The aim is to expand engagement to increase the positive impact and service outcomes.

Tenant Engagement Structure

Over the life of this Tenant Engagement Strategy we aim to develop a structure which allows tenants to participate as much or as little as they want. We see this being done as different streams of activities.

The Tenants' Voice will be a small group of representative tenants who will work with the council at a strategic level. Their brief will include monitoring performance against the expectations of the 'Charter for Social Housing Residents' and the Regulator for Social Housing's Consumer Standards and specifically the 'Tenant Involvement and Engagement Standard'.

Working alongside the senior managers and the councillor holding the housing portfolio, the group will help deliver year upon year of improved service delivery. The Tenants' Voice will make recommendations to the Assistant Director/Chief Officer for Housing and Director of Housing and share the views of tenants, which have been gained through evidence from the 'Your Choice' and 'Business Insight' channels (see below).

It is recognised for tenants to be able to perform this strategic role, they will require on-going support, training and appropriate resources.

May 2022 update – we have successfully set up the Strategic Tenants Advisory Panel (STAP). The opportunity to join was open to all tenants across the whole district and the panel were put together with support from already established involved tenants, TPAS and officers from the housing service. STAP was officially launched in October 2021 and has gone on to have bi monthly meeting with senior officers and representatives from across the service. So far they have had an impact on several key decisions and made changes to new and reviewed policies from the feedback they have given. The members ensure that they feedback any relevant items covered at the meetings to their communities and 'Your Choice' level tenant engagement groups and forums.

Your Choice will draw on the pool of residents who have expressed an interest in active engagement. It will include smaller groups of tenants who come together, probably online, to:

- Examine a particular service area in detail and make recommendations for changes, known as task and finish groups
- Examine and comment on proposals for changes to key policies
- Be involved in local issues such as major works on an estate
- Be part of particular interest groups
- Take part in local area walkabouts/inspections
- Be Estate Champions
- Be mystery shoppers

May 2022 update- There are several established groups and forums across the service including the strengthening and expansion of the Independent Living Forum (ILF), who recruited new members and now have the majority of schemes represented and recently underwent an election for the chair and vice chair roles. The ILF have representatives from our contractors (Repairs and Gas) along with our Communications Specialist and well as the Housing Services Manager (Independent Living Team) and the Tenant Liaison Specialist in attendance at every meeting so that they can discuss and resolve issues at scheme level and really hold the service to account where needed.

Leaseholders Forum- a small group of leaseholder attend online forum meetings to represent the interests of the leaseholders across the district and hold discussions with the Leasehold Senior Specialist around policies and planned changes in service charges, as well as queries around their individual leaseholds.

Assets and Development have Tenant Champions for each work stream. There are representative tenants who have either a strong interest or a skill sin each particular area. They cover -

- New build and regeneration,
- Repairs and Maintenance
- Compliance, health & Safety
- Major Works

These groups cover a variety of engagement activities, from helping design new build carbon neutral housing estates, to site visits and assisting in the procurement of new contracts. These are the more specialist roles and are usually project based. The Repairs Senior Specialist has now invited members

of STAP to join regular liaison meetings with the contractors so that they can see first-hand what KPIs are in place and how they are performing.

The developments outlined above help to ensure that there is transparency, good communication and that key officers are accessible.

New opportunities are available now for a dedicated communications team to assist us in improving the communications from the housing service to tenants. This will involve having input into the newsletters and helping us update the website content and testing new pages and apps to make dealing with us even easier and more streamlined.

There is also the opportunity to be part of the Estate Champion group. This is for very local issues at neighbourhood or block level. It will involve giving us feedback and views on the level of cleaning, grounds maintenance and a greater involvement in the neighbourhood inspections that happen across the district at various points in the year. The summer neighbourhood inspections are open to all tenants or leaseholders to join and are often also attended by district or town councillors and representatives from the contractors.

Your Choice Plus will involve seeking the views of as many tenants as possible, either on issues that affect all tenants or more locally-based issues, in ways that are accessible, convenient and do not require ongoing commitment. This could include, for example:

- Satisfaction surveys
- Local or tenant-wide online or postal consultations
- Quick polls using social media
- Seeking responses to articles in the tenant newsletter

Business Insight is about making good use of all the data and information that we possess or receive about services and satisfaction. It includes learning from best practice in other organisations. Some examples include:

- Tenant Satisfaction Survey – we will conduct an extensive survey, using the STAR (Satisfaction survey of, Tenants, and Residents) system, so we can compare our results with other landlords

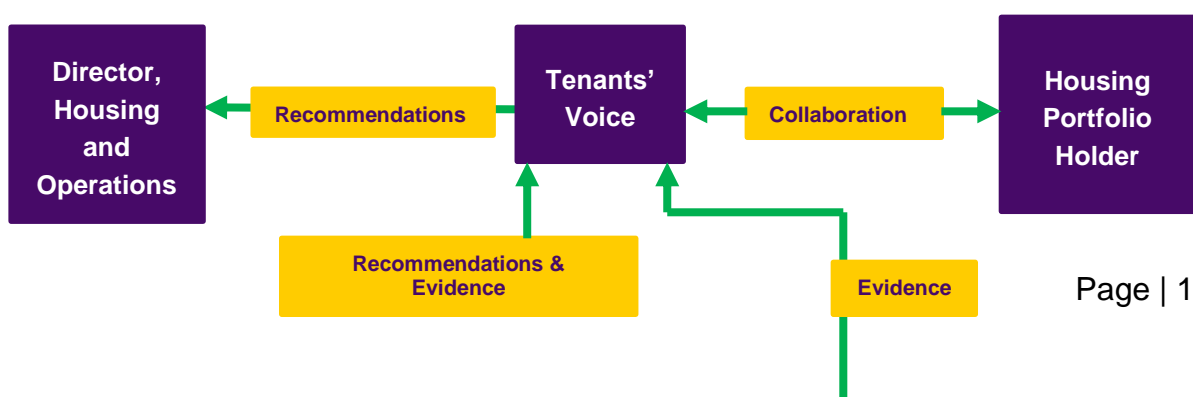
- Reviewing feedback received, including complaints and compliments, social media comments and contractor satisfaction surveys
- Working to improve our customer profile data
- Working to make best use of transactional data – the reasons our tenants contact us, such as to report a repair or a neighbourhood problem, which combined with profile data can help us to understand the important issues to different groups of tenants
- Exploring collaborative working with other landlords and organisations
- Aiming to introduce real-time data so we can quickly identify and respond to issues or concerns

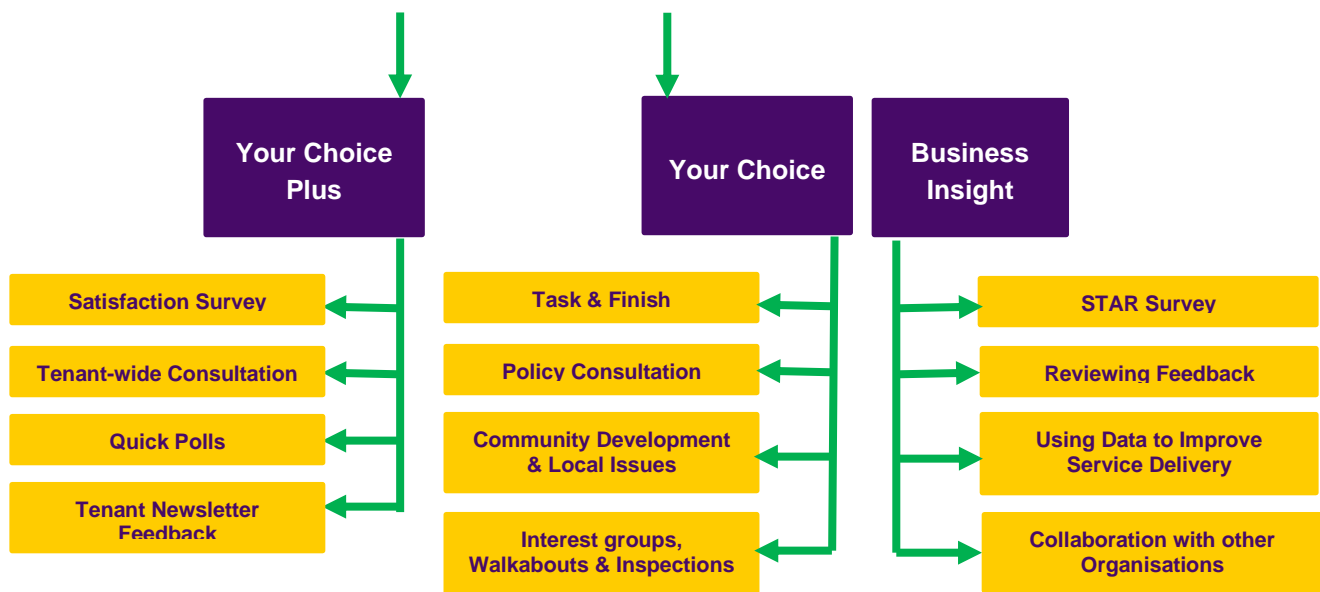
May 2022 Update – There are various neighbourhood level tenant engagement groups and opportunities across the ‘Your Choice Plus part of the Tenant Engagement structure. There are direct groups of tenants and leaseholders that feedback and take part in surveys via email and text. In February 2022 there was an online consultation by email asking for views about ending fixed term tenancies, that generated a good response and which supported our proposal for the cessation of these tenancies.

There is a tenants’ only private Facebook group that has a programme of three-times weekly updates and posts, and STAP are also given the opportunity to post to tenants directly, to share key messages independently of the council.

There is also the suggestions and feedback portal on the website as well as the dedicated tenant involvement email address that all gets channeled directly to the tenant engagement specialist to pick up and action.

Tied in with work to link the tenants section of the FHDC website to the ‘MyAccount’ service, the Housing Service has ambitions to collect more data from our tenants and then use the insights gained to help shape the service.





Supporting a Tenant Engagement Culture

Tenant Engagement comes from and promotes a culture of mutual trust, respect and partnership between tenants and the landlord. It exists when these interests work together towards a common goal of better housing conditions and housing services. Tenant engagement will not be the responsibility of one member of staff, but will be an expectation of all members of the housing team.

The key principles of a tenant engagement culture are that:

- Tenant engagement should be a continuous process where participants share information and ideas, working towards a common understanding of problems and agreeing solutions
- All participants need to have all the information available to consider issues properly, this needs to be clear, timely and accessible
- All participants need to have all the information available to consider issues properly. Information needs to be clear, timely and accessible
- Decision-making processes should be open, clear and accountable
- Tenants should have enough time to consider issues properly. They should have the opportunity to work out a common view

- The landlord must recognise the independence of the tenants' voice
- Good working relations evolve gradually so must be flexible to adapt to local circumstances
- Tenants need adequate resources for training and access to support in order to be organised and methodical when required

May 2022 update- All consultations, surveys and feedback requests are designed so that the majority of tenants are able to participate, should they wish to do so and they are given a generous amount of time to respond.

STAP have their agenda and any resources and presentations a full week before the meeting and if it is a long or complex document, such as a policy it is sent as early as possible so that they can confer and provide any feedback inbetween meetings.

All tenant engagement groups meetings are minuted and the minutes and actions from each previous meeting are checked and agreed independently by the tenants so that they are able to see the process and actions taken from their requests and feedback. The Tenant Engagement Specialist role covers out of office hours where needed and is on hand to respond or attend events and meetings at weekends and evenings.

Members of the engaged tenants groups have been provided with hardware where needed such as laptops and tablets, sessions have been provided to assist tenants in using online meeting platforms.

All questions received via social media are noted and responded to and resident involvement data is expected in reports that are produced by the housing service as a whole.

Barriers to Engagement

It is important to identify the barriers that hinder tenant engagement and how these can be overcome. We recognise there are many barriers which prevent engagement, including:

- Lack of skills, training and/or confidence needed Understanding published information
- Time, work, family, caring constraints
- Transport, travel and other expenses

The Council is therefore committed to offering solutions and opportunities so that tenant engagement is as easy to access as possible for tenants.. These solutions include, but are not limited to:

- Providing training and support for tenants who would like to engage in any way
- Providing information in a range of formats to ensure it can be understood by all
- Providing information in a timely way, allowing tenants a reasonable and appropriate period to understand the information before commenting or giving feedback
- Providing transport and covering the financial costs incurred by tenants and leaseholders in carrying out their roles
- Offering a wide range of engagement methods to suit all lifestyles, and in emergency situations to allow tenants to continue to engage safely
- Arranging meetings at times and locations, or online, which are accessible and safe for tenants
- Providing practical support to establish engagement groups

May 2022 update

Training has been provided to the STAP team, ranging from skills based, including IT and board member skills to technical housing knowledge training.

Full sessions have been provided to cover published information such as new government legislation, and policy and procedure that we are asking for feedback on.

We have a flexible approach to all tenant engagement, with a variety of ways to join in - online meetings, via email, telephone and letter, meetings can be facilitated at weekends or in the evenings if required. All costs are covered for transport and refreshments and other reasonable out of pocket expenses may be covered.

All meetings are facilitated and supported by council officers.

Valuing Diversity

At the heart of this the housing service is our commitment to providing a fair and equitable service and ensuring that tenants are treated without discrimination. This strategy helps to deliver this commitment. We will make sure that in delivering our services we continue to be inclusive and representative. We want all our tenants to have the opportunity to be involved, regardless of age, disability, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, marital status or civil partnership, pregnancy or maternity status. We are committed to a digital agenda but also we will provide information in other formats when required.

Training for Staff and for tenants about Tenant

Engagement

For this strategy to be successful it will be important that key staff and tenants have the right skills and approach. This will require a comprehensive training programme to help develop the right culture within the housing service, and to equip tenants with the necessary understanding of the service.

May 2022 update
Although tenant engagement is now embedded into the culture of the housing service, there are plans for routine staff training for all housing staff. This will be developed during 2022 and rolled out to all members of the housing team.

Communication

High quality communication is key to keeping tenants informed, and to developing a landlord/tenant relationship that encourages feedback and engagement. Quality can be measured in terms of the style, frequency and content of communications. As part of this strategy the council will:

- Publish a tenant newsletter twice each year, and work with tenants on its content and style
- Produce key performance information
- Ensure all consultation documents and correspondence are produced in a clear and accessible style
- Maintain an accessible and up to date housing section of the council's website
- Maintain a regular and up to date presence on social media

May 2022 update- FHDC have employed a campaigns expert as the housing team's Communications Specialist. The communications plan includes two main tenants' newsletters per year and 2 smaller bulletins per year, plus the housing Annual report. Updates are shared several times a week on the main social media pages and the website and events, updates and timely news is sent out with rent statements or via email and text.

The website contains the information on consultations, events and performance and it is being further developed in 2022 when there will be a customer portal

where tenants will be able access to data on their personal accounts, report repairs etc., and also receive information about any news alerts or engagement opportunities.

Tenants' Key Priorities

Based on feedback received from the STAR satisfaction survey conducted in December 2020, key service delivery priorities for tenants are:

- Repairs and maintenance
- A landlord who is easy to deal with
- Tenants treated fairly

Listening to tenants' views, this strategy will focus on engaging with tenants in relation to these key areas.

Monitoring Our Performance

It is important that tenants hold us to account, that we do what we say we will do, and our performance against the commitments set out in this strategy are visible to tenants, councillors and other key stakeholders. To do this we will:

- Produce a detailed action plan which will show how this strategy will be delivered
- Develop a set of key performance indicators to measure key aspects of the strategy
- Produce regular briefings on tenant engagement activities
- Produce a Tenant Engagement Annual Report setting out the work and achievements in this area

May 2022 update

A detailed Action Plan was developed in May 2021 to tie in with the launch of the strategy. A revised version for 2022 is now in place.

Regular updates of tenant engagement activities are provided in a variety of ways including updates to STAP members, articles in tenants' newsletter. There is an action plan item for 2022 to develop this into a more uniform and regular 'bulletin' style.

An annual report on Tenant Engagement Activities was completed and included in the main Housing Service Annual Report, and this will be repeated for 2022.

Action Plan

This strategy sets out our aims, ambitions and commitments for developing tenant engagement for the next three years. We acknowledge that we are not there yet and that this work will involve many different tasks, projects and work streams. Alongside this strategy we have produced an action plan which includes:

- Developing a training programme for staff and tenants
- Considering innovative ways to digitally engage with tenants
- Working to improve tenant profile data
- Working to improve tenant contact details, especially email addresses
- Developing the engagement structure
- Designing and implementing a recruitment process for the Tenants' Voice group
- Develop terms of reference and a work plan for the Tenants' Voice group
- Develop social media platforms

May 22 Review

An Action Plan was produced to coincide with the launch of the strategy. This has been revised and updated for 2022.

