

# Tenant Engagement Strategy

## Hearing our Tenants' Voice

2021-2024

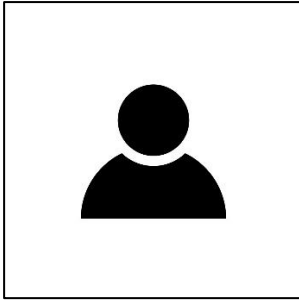
Housing Service

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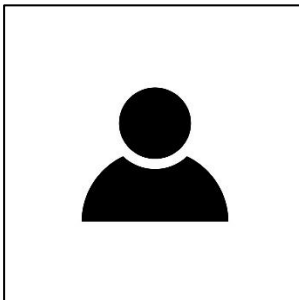
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## Foreword



### **Councillor David Godfrey, Housing Portfolio Holder**

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.



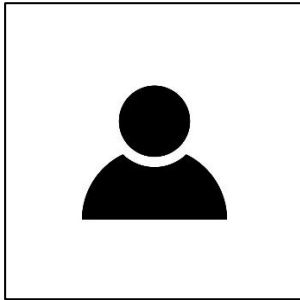
### **Elaine Bostock, Chair, Shepway Tenant and Leaseholder Board**

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 FHDC and 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 Blaszkowicz, Director, 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). 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.

## **1. Introduction**

### **1.1. 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.

## 1.2. 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 Folkestone and Hythe.

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.

## 1.3. Strategic Priorities for the Council

This strategy and 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 our district detailed in 'Creating Tomorrow Together' 2021-2030.

## **1.4. 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 2020 Housing 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 feedback 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.

## 2. About Tenant Engagement

### 2.1. 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.

## 2.2. 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 decisions 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 Shepway Tenant 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 the impact and service outcomes.

### **2.3. 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 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 Housing Portfolio Holder, to help deliver year upon year of improved service delivery, The Tenants' Voice will make recommendations to the Assistant Director and Director of Housing and share the views of tenants, which have been gained through evidence from the 'Your Choice' and 'Business Insight' channels.

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

**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

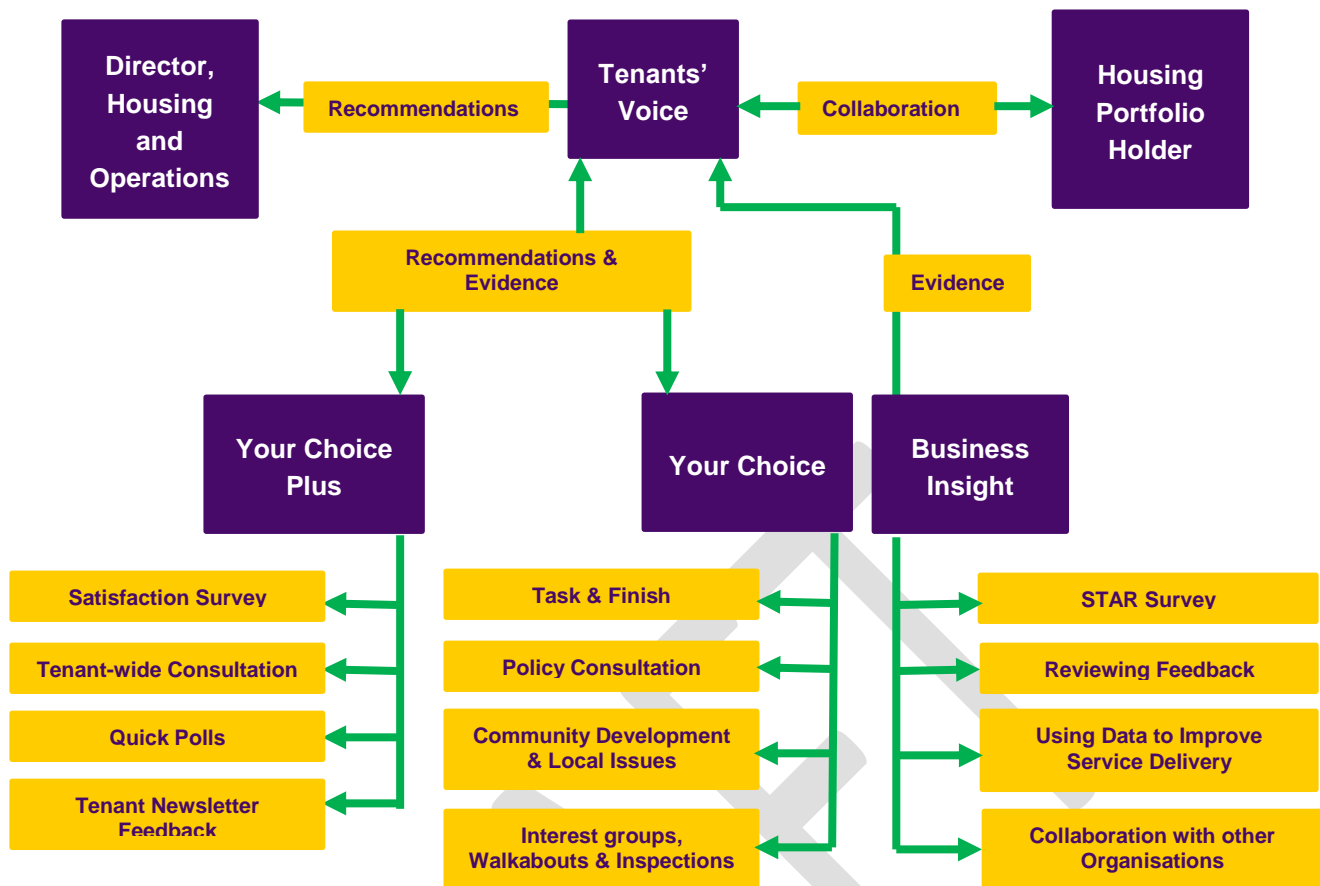
- Be Estate Champions
- Be mystery shoppers

**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 Tenants Newsletter

**Business Insight** is 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 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.



## 2.4. 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.

## **2.5. Barriers to Engagement**

It is important to identify the barriers that stop 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 for tenant engagement to be easy to access for as many tenants as possible. 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.

## **2.6. 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 we also will provide information in other formats when required.

## **3. 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.

## **4. 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 tenants newsletter 2 times per 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

## **5. Tenants' Key Priorities**

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

- Repairs & Maintenance
- Landlord being easy to deal with
- Treating tenants fairly

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

## **6. Monitoring Our Performance**

It is important that tenants hold us to account, we do what we say we will do, and that 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

## **7. 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 a Terms of Reference and work plan for the 'Tenants Voice' Group
- Developing social media platforms

**8. Tenant Engagement Action Plan**

To be inserted