

Meeting: Housing Sub-Committee

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Title: Involving tenants in housing services

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Service: Corporate Strategy

Directorate: Chief Executive's Office

Wards affected: All

1. Purpose of Report

The purpose of this report is to provide information to the Housing Sub Committee on the proposed changes to the corporate engagement approach and how these are being reflected in changes to the way the Authority's housing service involves its tenants – and councillors - in shaping improvements to services.

2. Recommendations

The sub-committee is invited to:

- a) Note the report;
- b) Feedback any suggestions for future closer working by its members with involved tenants.

Details

3. Corporate Engagement new approach

North Tyneside Council is a high performing authority that has a commitment to continue to be a 'listening' council that delivers for its residents and communities by involving them in decision-making.

Resident views and priorities shape the Council Plan as the strategic framework which sets the direction of the Authority and its services.

At present, the Authority, in common with all local authorities, must change to respond to increasingly challenging financial challenges and in doing so it recognises the importance of continued effective engagement with residents to ensure that policy direction and strategic decisions are in line with their priorities.

There are a range of statutory requirements which the Authority must meet in relation to engagement. The over-arching obligation on the Authority to consult arises from the Local Government Act 1999 Best Value Duty, which requires the organisation to consult on questions of policy or strategic decisions, as part of its requirement to secure continuous improvement. However, there are other statutory requirements for engagement, including responsibilities around equalities and diversity legislation, the statutory framework that guides its role as a landlord to its tenants; and duties in relation to looked after children.

Currently, there are a number of strategies across various Authority services which set out how residents and service users will be involved in decision making. The current corporate strategy was agreed by Cabinet in January 2012. As part of the Authority's Creating a Brighter Future programme, the teams involved in engagement were brought together into Corporate Strategy from April 2015. This has provided an opportunity to review how the Authority engages with its residents and to identify where improvements could be made.

The proposed new Corporate Engagement Strategy (set out at appendix 1) seeks to address the key outcomes of this review by providing a single corporate framework, setting out how the Authority will engage across all of its services to improve overall engagement outcomes and to provide a more co-ordinated and consistent approach that is more easily understood by residents and service users. It also seeks to ensure that the essential role of Elected Members in the engagement process is clearly recognised.

The proposed Strategy also seeks to ensure that engagement supports and enables the delivery of the Authority's Creating a Brighter Future programme.

The Strategy establishes a wide two-way communications approach, between the Authority, its residents and other stakeholders, and will be delivered through a range of easily accessible opportunities to ensure that everyone will have a choice in deciding whether, and if so how, they can be more involved. This spans from our customer service approach, and the increased use of digital communications and social media, through to intensive collaboration with customers and service users.

4. The new approach and housing involvement

4.1 The need for change

North Tyneside as an authority has seen the number of homes, and therefore tenants reduce from 30,000 to 15,000 properties. Many tenants have taken up the right to buy and the former traditional estates made up of all council tenants are no longer the case, and neighbourhoods now comprise cross tenure mix – including tenants, leaseholders, private tenants and home owners.

The Council's commitment to involving tenants remains, but the pool of tenants available is reduced and ageing. In recent years the involvement has generally been with a cohort of 80-100 tenants, who are very loyal and experienced tenants. The aim is to continue for these involved tenants to be able to help shape the authority's services, however, the ambition is that we widen our programme to encourage other tenants to have their say and to better focus activities to better drive service improvement in challenging financial circumstances for the HRA.

The housing service is currently planning for the reduction in Housing Revenue Account finances as government requested rent reductions over the next four years will decrease income significantly in the future.

Therefore, to ensure available money is used to deliver maximum benefits for tenants in the future, the service is also looking at how it can reflect the corporate commitment to creating a brighter future for residents by delivering services differently, and at less cost.

To maximise how the authority can use its engagement expertise housing involvement staff have transferred into Corporate Strategy, and are now part of a corporate communications and engagement service which provides tenant involvement activities under a service level agreement.

4.2 Legal considerations

The new approach will comply with the legal requirements on the housing service and the wider Authority.

Equalities Act	Expectation that engagement is proportionate and accommodates needs of those with protected characteristics. All engagement needs EIA
Local Government Act - Best Value Duty	Requires consultation on policy and strategic decisions . Need to consider economic, environmental and social impact. Consultation should include wide representatives - council tax payers, those who use or are likely to use the service, those with an interest in the area
(As above)	Where reducing or ending funding three months notice should be given to the organisation and the public/service user
Housing - Regulatory Framework 2012 and revised 2015 - requires local authority landlords to deliver the Consumer Standards - re tenant Involvement and Empowerment Standard; Home Standard; Tenancy Standard; Neighbourhood and Community Standard	Involvement and Empowerment standard requires choices, information and communications appropriate to diverse needs of tenants.
	Involvement and Empowerment Standard requires clear complaints procedure and publication of complaints annually
	Involvement and Empowerment Standard requires tenants are given a wide range of opportunities to influence and be involved in organisational policies and priorities, including service standards, scrutiny of performance and recommendations for improvement, management of homes, repairs and maintenance services and agreement of local offers for service delivery.
NOTE: The Economic Standard is not relevant to local authority landlords	

	<p>Involvement and Empowerment Standard requires tenants to be supported to exercise their Right to Manage where appropriate, support the formation and activities of tenant panels or equivalent groups and respond in a constructive and timely manner to them, providing support to tenants to build their capacity to be more involved.</p> <p>Improvement and Involvement Standard - consult on the scope of local offers for service delivery, including how performance is monitored, reported to and being scrutinised by tenants and arrangements for reviewing those on a periodic period</p> <p>Involvement and Empowerment Standard - consult on the scope of local offers for service delivery, including how performance is monitored, reported to, and being scrutinised by tenants and arrangements for reviewing those on a periodic period</p> <p>Involvement and Empowerment Standard- Consult with tenants at least once every three years on the best way of involving tenants in the governance and scrutiny of the organisation's housing management service</p> <p>Neighbourhood and Community Standard - shall consult with tenants on developing a published policy on how they work with relevant partners to prevent and tackle ASB in neighbourhoods associated with their home</p>
Housing Act 1985	<p>Requirement to consult with tenants on housing management matters, including: management, maintenance, improvement or demolition of dwelling houses let by the local authority</p> <p>Requirement to consult with tenants in developing a published policy for maintaining and improve the neighbourhoods associated with their homes</p>

5. Future housing involvement

5.1 Reflecting the corporate approach

The new housing involvement approach reflects the new Corporate Engagement Strategy by offering different levels of activities, enabling tenants to get involved as much, or as little as they wish to do so.

The overall programme will have at its foundation a forward plan of engagement activities, developed in partnership with housing managers. This will ensure that all opportunities are better promoted and all tenants will have the opportunity to engage in a wider range of activities, and in different ways.

The changes in the service have already enabled tenants to be involved in a wider remit, for example they have joined in engagement activities that will contribute to shaping the budget and Council Plan priorities, and participated in NECA events.

5.2 Informing

In line with the corporate commitment to enable resident to access services independently and to maximise the benefits of improved technology the aim is that over the next 12 months 80 percent of our tenant involvement approach will see people self- service information about housing services and independently feed back to the council using digital communications.

This will be facilitated with a programme of support to help tenants understand and use new digital methods of communication and engagement over the next 12 months.

The service is already well progressed along this route. The new North Tyneside Living facilities are all supplied with wi-fi access and have information screens and will be used as focal points in helping our tenants to learn more digital communications skills. The Safer Estates team have very successfully engaged with tenants through online engagement discussions, and the service has previously had its own Facebook page.

The council's website is also being developed as an up-to-date information resource that also enables tenants to easily carry out housing service transactions. This will in the future include the development of a new engagement portal that will enable all resident to find out about engagement opportunities, have their say on issues and access feedback on recent consultations etc.

Social media is an increasing method of communication for borough residents and both the council's Twitter account and Facebook will be developed to support housing tenants to get involved.

The previous Housing Matters has been withdrawn and instead information about housing services will be incorporated into the resident's magazine Our North Tyneside, which is produced four times per year.

The engagement team will work with housing officers to ensure that all regular contacts with tenants, for example the annual rent letters, are used as an opportunity to engage people in the involvement approach.

5.3 Consultation

Where there is a requirement for feedback on a specific issue the consultation approach will utilise a mix of activities.

There is already a well established process of seeking feedback on specific service activities, eg new tenants are asked for feedback on the Homefinder process and tenants involved in initiatives to tackle anti-social behaviour complete feedback to shape future services. These will continue, along with activities such as Readers Panels where tenants can feedback from home on proposed housing leaflets etc.and increased armchair scrutiny by tenants.

Some of this future consultation may be through digital feedback. However, there will also be opportunities for housing service managers, to request task and finish groups to enable tenants to be consulted face-to-face in more depth on specific issues.

5.4 Involvement

It is recognised that where there is an issue relevant to a number of people that there needs to be opportunities for wider involvement from residents in communities, including tenants.

The engagement team is currently exploring ways to capture intelligence from a range of sources to help the Authority to intervene at an earlier stage of issues arising.

To replace the current programme of Estate Walkabouts and Have Your Say Days a new approach to community activities will be developed and implemented where appropriate.

These will be driven by concerns/issues that clearly impact on a group of people. They are likely to be held in areas where there are council tenants – and North Tyneside Living projects may for example provide some of the settings for these kinds of events. However, these events will be open to people from all tenures in the area.

To maximise the value of these events other services will be invited to participate, for example the revenues and benefits team may wish to provide information on benefits and managing finances, and they could link into community clean-ups and even encourage community involvement in neighbourhood activities. Where relevant estate walk-about could be offered where there is something that the public may benefit from discussing in situ.

The annual Making a Difference Conference will be held annually and will be used for tenants to feedback their ideas for future involvement activities and ways to get tenants more involved.

5.5 Collaboration

Currently, the housing involvement approach is built around Service Development Groups. There are eight groups, which each meet four times a year to focus on service performance.

There are clear terms of reference for Service Development Groups which aimed to ensure a regular refresh of membership. However, attendance numbers are reduced and often meetings can involve less than five people. In addition, the focus in recent years has seen this expertise only used to comment on regular performance data.

To address this situation a number of changes are to be implemented:

- **To change the frequency and emphasis of groups:** Subject to the need to change the themes to reflect any housing service redesign activities, the number of groups will be changed so they have a clear annual programme of work that can attract interest from more tenants, and the frequency of groups is reduced, to limit the demand on tenants time. The focus is therefore proposed to comprise:

Estates and tenancies (up to (three times a year): Focus on services in relation to tenancies, and keeping estates clean and safe. (This can include anti-social behaviour)

Repairs and Investment (twice a year): Focus on day-to-day repairs, Decent Homes Standard, and larger investment schemes.

Income(twice a year): Focus on the initiatives that enable the council to collect rents from tenants and to enable tenants to access support where needed eg benefit changes and helping tenants to access housing payment in different ways

North Tyneside Living (twice a year): focusing on the sheltered housing delivery programme and services to North Tyneside Living tenants

Overview: This group will involve senior managers and tenants and will monitor a forward plan of housing involvement, and receive reports of activities considered by each of the groups. The overview group may also recommend more detailed task and finish groups, that could see tenants and members working together to consider a specific issue, or may for example prompt a wider community involvement activity

The Involvement group remit is assumed into Overview; Homefinder is disbanded due to duplication as alternative feedback is already regularly gathered from new tenants and any specific issues around house letting would fall into Estates and Tenancies;

- **To change the format of meetings to support service improvement:** The Repairs and Investment Service Development Group has followed a different format to the other themes and this has appeared to prove more successful in terms of driving service improvement and having increased attendance to other groups. Therefore, all groups will adopt this new approach. This will see service managers identifying two or three topics for consideration by the group, and providing a mix of information for context and performance information that tenants can discuss in a workshop approach.

To provide a clear process for feedback from tenants, notes from each group will go to the Overview Group, which can bring together senior managers, tenants and a representative from the corporate engagement team. It will monitor a forward plan of housing involvement, and receive reports of activities considered by each of the groups. The overview group may also recommend time limited task and finish groups, that could see

tenants and members working together to consider a specific issue, or may for example prompt a wider community involvement activity

6. Members and housing involvement activities

It is recognised that members have an important role in housing involvement activities and need to be kept informed about the work tenants are undertaking. At the same time it is acknowledged that the time demands on both councillors and involved tenants can make bringing them together more challenging ie tenants events are largely during the day. Therefore the following proposals are suggested:

- Reports of activities being considered by tenants will be reported back to all members via the Members Newsletter
- Housing Sub Ctte members will be invited to get involved in at least one Task and Finish Group considerations with tenants per year
- Members will be informed of all community involvement activities
- Insight from members about community issues and concerns will be welcomed to inform future event planning.

7. Next Steps

As the statutory requirements expect there will need to be a consultation with tenants on these proposals. It is therefore proposed that an event is organised in January. This will incorporate:

- Feedback on the current budget proposals and impact on the HRA
- The proposals for a new approach to housing involvement
- An opportunity for tenants to provide feedback on the following:
 - The future housing involvement approach
 - How more tenants can be encouraged to get involved
 - Proposals around taxi policy and tenant training.

Draft Corporate Engagement Strategy

1. Introduction

North Tyneside Council is a high performing authority that is recognised for our achievements and the quality of our services. We have a commitment-and a vision- to continue to be a council that delivers for its residents and its communities by involving them in decision-making.

In response to consultation with our residents we have set ourselves clear priorities, against the themes of 'Our People', 'Our Places' and 'Our Economy'. These are the foundation of the North Tyneside Council Plan and the focus for delivery of our services.

The Council, in common with all local authorities, has had to respond to increasingly severe national austerity measures. In responding to these financial challenges, together with the increased demand for services from a growing population, a new approach to service delivery is being implemented to create a brighter future for residents focused around the Council Plan deliveries

Effective engagement with residents is essential to the successful delivery of this approach.

This Engagement Strategy sets out the framework within which we will deliver a more joined up approach across the organisation that meets both the legal requirements and gives a voice to residents and service users in influencing policy decisions and re-shaping services.

Our offer will cover a wide spectrum of different ways to communicate with you and give residents, service users and other stakeholders the opportunity to feedback and be involved in decision making. It will span from customer service approach and the increased use of digital communications and social media provides new opportunities to enhance the approach to reach residents and other stakeholders more easily.

2. Objectives

The Engagement Strategy will deliver a co-ordinated two-way communications approach that informs, but also engages and involves residents and other important stakeholders in providing feedback, to help shape decisions that contribute to creating a brighter future for North Tyneside - its residents, communities and businesses as well as for those who work in, or visit the borough.

The approach will meet statutory requirements, be accessible, and offer a broad range of different ways to give feedback and get involved. This will ensure that everyone will have a choice in deciding whether, and if so how they can be more involved.

We will help people to understand when it is not possible for us to involve people in decision making. This is likely to be in the following circumstances:

- Emergency situations. There are times when we will need to act for safety reasons and may not be able to engage. We will, as soon as is reasonable, explain our need to do this.
- Legislative occurrences. There may be situations where we locally have to respond to a directive from central government. In these situations we will engage with residents on any opportunities that may arise where we can shape things locally.
- Operational decisions: The engagement strategy will help set the policy direction of the council. The way these policies are implemented, i.e. how the council allocates its staff to deliver services, or deals with specific issues relating to individual customers is an operational decision.

3. Core principles

These are the ways that we will make sure all our staff work with residents regardless of how we engage

- Inclusive: Making sure that everyone will be able to engage in the process.
- Clear: Being clear on our aims of each engagement activity from the outset, and the extent to which residents will be involved.
- Integrated: Ensuring, that what we do at whatever level, is joined up with decision making processes.
- Tailored: Understanding our audience and using different methods appropriately to enable and encourage them to be involved.
- Feedback: We will give feedback, through agreed channels, when we have completed our activity.
- Timely: we will ensure that we give, where we can, sufficient notice to make opportunities available to all. We will take into account those times when it is more appropriate to engage depending on our target audience.

4. The approach

The aim is to deliver a wide range of activities and opportunities that enables everyone to easily access information to help them understand what we are doing as a publically funded organisation, and why, but with additional opportunities that, if they wish to, can

enable the public to hold us to account by giving feedback to inform decision-making and shape services.

At each level of engagement we will explain the offer and what people can expect from being involved.

The different opportunities to access information and get involved are brought together under four categories:

-**Informs** by actively promoting/signposting residents and other relevant stakeholders, to information about North Tyneside Council services (and how to access them), our decisions and the delivery of our [Council Plan](#). This will include helping people understand how we are addressing the challenging economic position by doing things differently in the interests of our borough's residents and its communities.

When we **INFORM** people about our services or changes to our services we could use our social media platforms or our resident's magazine. There may also be information in the form of an annual report, for example from our housing service aimed at letting tenants know how we are doing.

-**Consults** with our residents and service users when significant changes or new approaches are being considered, so we can ensure that we listen to their thoughts in a timely and efficient way before we reach that decision. When we consult we will make it clear what questions we are asking and how the responses will be used. Some of the consultation will relate to statutory process, including planning and licensing issues.

When we need to make changes to or develop new services we may need to **CONSULT**. Times when we have done this have included our annual budget consultation. Through this, residents have helped us to make decisions about how and where to spend our funding.

-**Involves** residents and service users in a creative and innovative way, ensuring equity of access to opportunities which arise.

We work with our Young Mayor and Youth Council to make sure that we **INVOLVE** children and young people in the services they receive now and in the future. Through this mechanism we have used creative ways to ensure that they are able to work with us to design and develop services.

-**Collaborates** with service users, working together in a more in depth way which takes into account the individuals' interest and expertise on the issue. Some of these

activities will focus on ***empowering*** our residents to create solutions that arise in their communities through using methods such as social action, ensuring that their voices are central in driving agendas.

Through our Adult Social Care services, service users are able to **COLLABORATE** on co-production of some of our services.