

**Meeting** Executive

**Portfolio Area** Housing, Health and Older People  
Neighbourhoods & Cooperative Working

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## CO-OPERATIVE TENANT AND RESIDENT INVOLVEMENT STRATEGY

### KEY DECISION

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### 1 PURPOSE

1.1 This report proposes new arrangements for ensuring that Stevenage Borough Council (SBC) tenants & residents have a range of opportunities to participate in the management of their homes and neighbourhoods. It builds on the development of the Co-operative Neighbourhoods operating model, responds to the Social Housing White Paper: 'a charter for social housing residents', and to the Tenant Participation Advisory Service (TPAS) report into tenant scrutiny arrangements at SBC.

## **2 RECOMMENDATIONS**

- 2.1 It is recommended that Executive:
  - 2.1.1 Approve a revised participation and engagement approach as outlined in this report, for Stevenage tenants and residents living in homes rented and leased from the Council.
  - 2.1.2 Note the development of Co-operative Neighbourhoods as the mechanism for delivering meaningful, local engagement opportunities and better relationships with residents that will also meet the specific service and legal requirements relating to the Council's housing portfolio.
  - 2.1.3 Approve an ongoing approach to tenant and resident participation based on 'engaging, listening and acting', reaching as many tenants and residents as possible to understand what is important to them in their neighbourhood.
  - 2.1.4 Approve the new co-operative customer scrutiny model for housing functions (Appendix 1)
  - 2.1.5 Approve the development of a new housing forum to create the opportunity for tenants, residents and councillors to engage in the strategic development of housing services.

### 3 BACKGROUND

#### 3.1 Resident Involvement

3.1.1 When Stevenage Homes returned to SBC in 2012 the following structures were established:

Housing Management Advisory Board (HMAB)	Tenants' work together with senior members of staff and councillors. Meeting monthly basis with a responsibility for making strategic decisions on housing services such as budgets and housing business plans. Training opportunities provided
Customer Scrutiny Panel (CSP)	Tenants agree which services to review from looking at SBC performance information. Reviews sought to improve services. Recommendations made to the HMAB and improvement plans agreed and monitored.
Resident Inspectors	Inspections carried out against service standards across housing services including empty homes, caretaking and grounds maintenance. They also link in and support the CSP work on reviews
Disability Advisory Panel	Involved in areas of housing services that impact on people with disabilities. Meeting monthly to discuss the various issues within relevant departments.
Housing Service Groups	Includes regular group meetings (such as Sheltered and Flexicare housing forum, Anti-Social Behaviour forum) or task and finish groups working on specific projects within a housing service when needed (such as Leaseholder Handbook Review group).
Customer Pool	A database of tenants' who have expressed an interest in being involved and the services that they are interested in being involved with.

3.1.2 As part of the Business Unit Review in 2019, with a focus on enabling co-operative working, tenant and resident participation functions merged into the new Community Development service. It was then identified that although there were a number of structures and mechanisms for tenant and resident participation which had been built over a period of years, the number and diversity of individual tenants and residents involved was limited. There were a number of reasons identified for this:

- Existing structures for customer scrutiny demanded a term of 3 years commitment from residents, with a significant time investment required to undertake scrutiny reviews. This was also identified as a challenge in recruiting new members to HMAB
- Digital platforms had not been developed or utilised to encourage a more diverse range of tenants and residents actively engaging with the Council in a more convenient manner
- Consultations had often been narrow in scope and did not broaden to consider wider neighbourhood issues for tenants and leaseholders.

### **3.2 A charter for social housing residents; Social Housing White Paper**

3.2.1 Chapter 5 of the white paper, first published in November 2020, addresses the right of tenants and resident to 'have your voice heard by your landlord'. The key points call on landlords to learn from best practice and to offer a tailored and varied approach that enables residents to engage when and how they want to. The Government will also develop new opportunities and an empowerment programme for residents and there will be a review of professional training and development. Responding to these directives will require the Council to review and refresh its approach to tenant and resident involvement - exploring new and innovative methods of encouraging participation. This will include a focus on having a voice around safety in relation to the housing stock.

### **3.3 TPAS Review of SBC Scrutiny arrangements**

- 3.3.1 In 2019 TPAS was commissioned to provide an external view on customer scrutiny arrangements at SBC (Appendix 2). The review looked at current processes and involved a session with the existing Customer Scrutiny Panel to review strengths and weaknesses. The review also sought to identify good resident involvement practice from elsewhere and to pilot new approaches in a Stevenage setting.
- 3.3.2 In January 2020, in collaboration with the Customer Scrutiny Panel and with support from TPAS a pilot “bootcamp” scrutiny event was held at the Ibis Hotel. The aim of this event was to concentrate a scrutiny session within the space of a few hours on a Saturday morning with an open invite to tenants and leaseholders who might want to take part. The theme selected was the new Gas Home MOT being introduced across the housing stock. Over 50 tenants and 10 leaseholders attended this event, many of whom had not engaged with the Council before. This approach was effective as it drew a diversity of tenants and residents voices, and saw a partnership approach in terms of facilitation from Housing and Community Development teams.
- 3.3.3 TPAS concluded their review in July 2020. This included a number of recommendations which were shared with the existing customer scrutiny panel members:
- SBC continue to undertake service reviews in a more dynamic manner and disband the existing customer scrutiny panel
  - Service areas for review to be identified by the Housing Management Advisory Board (HMAB) or an appropriate steering group made up of residents and councillors
  - A minimum of two borough wide scrutiny bootcamps should be held each year and could be complimented by community-based activities (focus groups and pop-up events) and digital/online engagement (emails, surveys etc).

- Consider a digital platform for leaseholders to improve leaseholder input and satisfaction
- Consider developing a database of tenant and resident volunteers that captures how they would like to be involved and what service areas they are interested in
- Consider a review of HMAB
- Value engagement by evidencing and assessing activities and celebrating successes

### **3.4 Launch of Co-operative Neighbourhoods**

3.4.1 The landscape for tenant and resident participation has also changed during the past twelve months due to the roll out of the Co-operative Neighbourhoods (CN) operating model which was launched in late summer 2020. CN aims to put residents at the heart of decision making by making services more responsive to the strengths, needs and aspirations of communities and localities. The neighbourhood-based teams will create localised engagement opportunities focussed on the communities' Council housing residents live in with the aim of preventing issues before they escalate and therefore reducing complaints and avoidable contact over time.

3.4.2 In 2019 the Council adopted a community engagement framework (Appendix 3). This has been further developed through Co-operative Neighbourhoods based on a 'ladder of participation'. This sees involvement falling under five headings: informing, consulting, involving, collaborating, empowering.



3.4.3 Such an approach focusses on starting where the communities are and what is important to them. This principle should also be applied to residents living in Council housing.

**3.5 A NEW STRATEGY FOR TENANT & RESIDENT INVOLVEMENT**

3.5.1 Co-operative Neighbourhoods is based on the idea that, by having staff more embedded in local neighbourhoods, engaging, listening and acting, the Council is better able to respond to the issues that are important to residents and to support ways of helping people help themselves. This approach, based on Co-operative Council values, will be at the centre of the new Co-operative Tenant and Resident Involvement Strategy.

3.5.2 It is understood that tenants and residents are not all 'time rich' and that a variety of opportunities to encourage and enable engagement with the Council is essential. This may be by improving access to digital platforms, social media or through pop up events in community settings, but also by ensuring that daily face to face interactions between SBC and residents are as meaningful as possible. The Council will also find innovative ways to capture the interest of those voices that are not currently heard as well as they could be, such as Black Asian and Minority Ethnic communities, young people, families and those with complex needs. SBC will be more active in the community and better known as a result and will offer tenants and residents a variety of ways to have their voice heard. By doing so, the Council will also meet the legal requirements for Housing and support the Housing & Investment business plan.

3.5.3 Adopting a set of principles, consistent with a co-operative Council approach, will enable officers to make the most of their interactions with tenants and residents at the point of service delivery as well as through specifically arranged involvement events and activities. Principles will include:

- Involvement at street and neighbourhood level is likely to be the most valuable and productive
- Whilst there is a place for structure, good human relationships are more important and pave the way for more formal participation as better relationships are formed
- Encouraging and supporting tenants and residents to self-organise where they want to
- Ensure staff input is productive, to build confidence enabling tenants and residents to act and hold the Council to account whilst also providing clear pathways to do so.
- Plan engagement activities holistically that consider the needs and interests of the tenants and residents first
- Combine participation with other plans, such as improving fire safety or reviewing the Council's major refurbishment contract



3.5.4 The proposals presented here should be considered as ‘next steps’ in a strategy which, by its nature, needs to be developed ‘with’ and not ‘for’ tenants and residents. However, by taking the steps proposed so far, the strategy will be built by reaching as many tenants and residents as possible to understand what is important to them in their neighbourhoods and in the relationship they have with the Council as their landlord. There are 6 key strands to the proposals for developing the strategy:

#### **I. Participation based on the HRA Business Plan**

The business plan will set out areas where the Council is undertaking work in neighbourhoods, such as the Major Refurbishment Contract programme. Existing arrangements which inform and consult tenants and residents on schemes can be enhanced to move up the ladder of participation to encompass involving, collaborating, and empowering. They can also be used as part of the co-operative customer scrutiny arrangements. Likewise, where the business plan highlights particular services that need to be reviewed, for example, services for older people, similar local arrangements can be put in place. As well as neighbourhood-based arrangements, opportunities for digital engagement will also be increased. Ultimately, the aim is to ensure that the HRA Business Plan itself is formulated as a result of tenant and resident participation. There is an opportunity here to move from the HMAB model to a wider Housing Forum based approach which would provide housing management the opportunities to share and receive feedback on strategic plans for services with a wider group of residents and councillors

#### **II. Participation through Co-operative Neighbourhoods**

Priorities identified at a neighbourhood level, whether by tenants and residents, Councillors, council staff or partners will often require more engagement with others in the area. This may be in relation to problems that need resolving but could equally be about ideas that tenants and residents have for improving their neighbourhood. The strategy will ensure that that issues raised at neighbourhood level are either managed

as part of the day-to-day work of co-operative neighbourhoods teams, or there is a smooth flow from frontline co-operative working through to oversight by the Operational Board to ensure joined up work across teams and best use of resources.

### **III. New arrangements for scrutiny**

Following the recommendation of the TPAS review, the following opportunities for tenants and residents to scrutinise housing management services will be adopted (Appendix 1):

- Resident Involvement Panels: Similar to the Gas Home M.O.T boot camp trialled in 2020 as a result of the Tpas review. Tenants and residents are brought together for a period of time to work with SBC Officers to find solutions to issues or to agree on new ways of working. CN teams work with their communities to ensure panels are representative. Scrutiny can be carried out within CN areas or town wide depending on the nature of the issue.
- As set out above in the section on the Business Plan, building on existing events designed to inform and consult, such as pre-contract meetings for block refurbishment, to enable tenants and residents to hold the Council to account for the work undertaken
- Online Discussion: tenants and residents can have their say via the website or social media platforms. This is shared with officers who will work with tenants and residents in an open and transparent way, providing information and allowing the services to be scrutinised. The digital approach will also make use of an App, provided by GROOP, which has been developed as a 'community management platform', piloted as part of the Covid-19 response within Communities and Neighbourhoods. The app will maintain details and connections with community volunteers, but additionally be able to 'case manage' calls and process requests for help. In the same way, volunteers will also be connected to each other. This will be further supported by the

customer pool questionnaire which has been updated and is available on the Council's website

- Pop Up Events: CN teams and housing staff will be present in community locations to talk to local people about what matters to them, to follow up on issues, and provide further information to enable scrutiny.
- Opportunities for existing CSP residents to join a steering group and help make decisions based on themes to scrutinise

#### **IV. Make every contact count**

Participation should not be just about specific events and structures but should also be about how the day to day contact that staff have with tenants and residents is used as opportunities to learn about what is important, how services need to be developed, and how people can be helped to help themselves. Staff in housing, customer services, communities and neighbourhoods and a range of other services can ensure that every contact is valued and that what tenants tell the council as part of day-to-day service delivery, or through conversations when out and about in the neighbourhood, is as important constructive as any form of participation.

#### **V. Developing the strategy 'with' tenants and residents**

Based on the approach set out above of engaging, listening and acting, reaching as many tenants and residents as possible to understand what is important to them in their neighbourhood, the strategy should constantly evolve in response to tenant and resident input and through learning what works well and what does not.

#### **VI. Learning from best practice**

The council will continue to learn from best practice in tenant participation, particularly from other landlords which share Stevenage's co-operative ethos, including those councils who are part of Co-operative Council's Innovation Network (CCIN). The strategy though should continue to develop approaches that are authentic and genuine, based on the

Council's values and the principle set out in this report rather than taking a tick-box approach to fitting with best practice frameworks.

### **3.6 The role of Co-operative Neighbourhoods (CN) teams**

3.6.1 CN teams will support these principles and become the mechanism for delivering them by;

- Providing resources directly working in neighbourhoods enabling the council to build effective relationships with tenants and residents
- Providing a range of opportunities for tenants and residents to be involved in the management of their homes and neighbourhoods
- Supporting tenants and residents to develop their own activities and projects which help to make their neighbourhood a better place to live
- Working together with colleagues in Co-operative Neighbourhoods Teams to provide clear routes into other Council and partner services and solving issues in a timely way.

3.6.2 Furthermore, the council will improve its processes for meeting participation needs arising from CN teams by developing and maintaining a Corporate Engagement Plan that will capture all planned engagement activities across the Council as well as keeping abreast of what is going on externally. This will be very much a working document that will aim to:

- Help better resource engagement opportunities by sharing staff resources, joining up activities where appropriate and looking at where the council can add value by linking up with internal/external teams.
- Embed the key principles of the Community Involvement Framework (Appendix 3) by using them as a planning tool for tenant and resident engagement activities and consultations.

### **3.7 Measuring success**

3.7.1 SBC will develop performance measures that reflect the outlined strategy to ensure it is meeting the requirements of the Housing White Paper and regulatory standards, including but not limited to:

- Evaluating the input of residents by tracking where they have had an impact and changes have been made – using the ‘ladder of participation’ to benchmark
- Case studies
- Tenant and resident involvement activity in neighbourhoods
- Problems resolved
- Tenant and resident feedback
- Improved performance
- STAR survey
- Resident satisfaction survey
- Landlord inspection by regulator

## **4, REASONS FOR RECOMMENDED COURSE OF ACTION AND OTHER OPTIONS**

4.1 The proposals for developing participation opportunities, set out above, are recommended to ensure that engagement activities are more proactive and empowering, aiming to involve more tenants and residents than ever before. It aims to build relationships on a human and neighbourhood level, engaging people on the issues that are most important to them. They have been developed in this way to be consistent with the Council’s Co-operative Neighbourhoods operating model.

4.2 The approach will help to forge better, more productive links between tenants and residents, Councillors, staff and the voluntary, community and social enterprise sector. Although tenant and resident participation is part of a broader community engagement strategy, it is important to acknowledge that there are elements which are specific to the relationship between the Council and the tenants and residents that live in the homes it owns and manages.

This Strategy will provide a framework to enable tenants and residents to get involved to a degree and in the areas in which they are most interested. As well as complementing the Council's Co-operative Neighbourhoods, the strategy also responds to both the Housing White Paper and to the recommendations in the TPAS report with regard to scrutiny arrangements.

- 4.3 With regards to the White Paper, there is little in the way of prescriptive detail. However, there is encouragement to pursue 'best practice' and the document referred to, 'Together with Tenants', supports an approach which is about 'more than compliance' with legislation, best practice or frameworks, but is 'about organisations developing a culture and an intent to build strong and trusting relationships with residents.' At the same time, by starting to develop a wider and deeper awareness of the participation opportunities now, the Council will put itself in a strong position to assure it is meeting its obligations to support tenants and residents having their voices heard. The Council's strategy will need to further develop as the statutory guidance is defined and specific expectations are set out.
- 4.4 The impact of Covid-19 during 2020 meant that both the Customer Scrutiny Panel and Housing Management Boards had to be suspended in a physical form. This also highlighted digital exclusion issues as alternative virtual meeting arrangements were not a possibility for a number of involved tenants and residents. The review was therefore paused in order to develop further options for broader community involvement.
- 4.5 The strategy also follows the recommendations of the TPAS review into scrutiny arrangements by replacing the existing Customer Scrutiny Panel with more dynamic arrangements, set out in this report, which will engage a much wider group of tenants and residents.
- 4.6 It is therefore proposed that instead of re-establishing existing meetings, customer scrutiny arrangements move to the new participatory model (see Appendix 1) and that the opportunity to evolve HMAB with a wider forum for strategic housing issues is developed over the coming months with

councillors, tenants and residents. At the same time a database will be developed for tenants and residents who wish to be involved at various levels.

- 4.7 The strategy represents a starting point to invigorate tenant and resident participation, drawing on the Council's own approach, work commissioned from TPAS, in response to the Housing White Paper and from a review of existing guidance and 'best practice'. As such, there are sound reasons for adopting this approach and it is not recommended that the existing structures are maintained as these no longer reflect the way tenant and resident involvement has developed. Therefore it will not enable the Council to meet the requirements of the Social Housing White Paper. It does not rule out alternative options suggested by continuous engagement with various 'best practice' examples, but they will form part of the ongoing evolution of the strategy, developed in partnership 'with' tenants and residents rather than 'for' them.

## **5 IMPLICATIONS**

### **5.1 Financial Implications**

- 5.1.1 The development and changes to tenant and resident Involvement structures set out in this report will be cost neutral as it will be delivered through existing staffing and budgets.

### **5.2 Legal Implications**

- 5.2.1 The housing service responds to its legal obligation as set out by the Regulator for Social Housing. Current tenant and resident involvement arrangements are framed within the Tenant Involvement and Empowerment Standard 2017. This sets a clear expectation for social housing providers to ask tenants and residents how they would like to be involved in the management of their homes and to provide the appropriate scrutiny arrangements for tenants and residents to raise issues in relation to the management of their homes. The standard will be maintained through new

arrangements with more opportunities for different tenants and residents to get involved in the management of their homes in different ways.

- 5.2.2 The proposals outlined in this paper maintain and enhance the tenant and resident scrutiny arrangements for social housing tenants and leaseholders. Further legal implications will be reviewed and maintained in accordance with the Social Housing White Paper as statutory guidance is published.

### **5.3 Risk Implications**

- 5.3.1 Risks will be identified, tracked and monitored via the Operational Risk Register and reviewed by the Assistant Director for Communities and Neighbourhoods.
- 5.3.2 The development of a clear communications strategy in relation to opportunities to get involved will be vital to mitigating risks around tenant and resident awareness of a new model and approach.
- 5.3.3 There will also need to be careful consideration given to resourcing and facilitating engagement activities to ensure a range of residents can participate in the right way.

### **5.4 Policy Implications**

- 5.4.1 Future development of policies will need to determine how they relate to and impact on tenant and resident involvement activities. It is envisaged that further policy development in relation to housing will be conducted through the participatory approach with tenants and residents outlined in this report.

### **5.5 Environmental Implications**

- 5.5.1 Involving tenants and residents through Co-operative Neighbourhood working will be one of the means through which the Council will help residents to think about tackling climate change in their local environment. It is therefore anticipated, that there will be positive environmental implications, by building greater capacity for engagement and improved opportunities for conversations with tenants and residents on environmental issues which will enable them to support environmental based voluntary work in their local neighbourhood.



## **5.6 Staffing and Accommodation Implications**

- 5.6.1 Co-operative Neighbourhoods teams will provide the structures for delivering tenant and resident engagement. The Strategic and Operational leads will ensure engagement activities are planned with a joined up approach supported by Community Development Officers who will take responsibility for driving neighbourhood engagement.

## **5.8 Equalities and Diversity Implications**

- 5.8.1 With the Council having established an Equalities Commission, and following the strategy detailed in this report, SBC will develop a broad understanding of who is accessing its services by continually 'engaging, listening and acting'. When considering protected characteristics, it is clear the Council must ensure flexibility within its engagement processes, taking into account potential barriers to engagement. These include but are not limited to:

- Language
- Digital access; including those with IT but limited capability to use it or affordability issues (to access data/WIFI services etc.)
- Disability
- Organisational mistrust

By ensuring a variety of engagement opportunities, minority communities will be better placed to get involved. Through the Council's Youth Council, play service, and sport and leisure teams, engagement with young people can be tailored to reach specific communities as well as a broad range of younger residents. The Equalities Commission will also explore the views of BAME communities within the town, through a continuous listening exercise to produce guidance for SBC in meeting its tenants and resident's needs. The council must also consider the more complex needs of its tenants and residents, intersectionality means many living with a protected characteristic will be living with more than one, in these cases SBC needs to ensure its engagement is flexible enough to be able to provide access to the more vulnerable in the community.

## **5.9 Service Delivery Implications**

5.9.1 These are set out in the report. The approach sits within the new neighbourhood operating model and will provide a housing focus to community involvement as part of these arrangements.

## **5.10 Community Safety Implications**

5.10.1 It is anticipated that the Co-operative Tenant and Resident Involvement Strategy will have positive implications for community safety, with a focus on community engagement and strengthening relationships, providing early help, prevention and improved partnership working. Community Safety Officers are assigned to neighbourhood areas through Co-operative Neighbourhoods working practices which also provide an operational link to the Police.

## **5.11 Information Technology Implications**

5.11.1 There will be a need for fast and effective IT support and new hardware/software considerations to assist the model. In the first instance there will be a need for technology that is able to connect teams remotely and to collect neighbourhood information in a way that is visible to all. Moving forward there will be a need to investigate how IT can help teams to have a full picture of what is happening across all services and IT platforms.

5.11.2 The importance of the right digital platforms for engagement will be vital to ensuring those who wish to participate digitally can do effectively.

## **5.12 Safeguarding Children Implications**

5.12.1 In addition, safeguarding considerations will follow the SBC policy with relevant frontline staff and responsible officers identified for continuous professional development and training opportunities. Youth engagement protocols will also be reviewed and strengthened to ensure compliance across the Council's youth work provision as this area is enhanced through better engagement opportunities with Stevenage's young people.

### **5.13 Other Corporate Implications**

5.13.1 The development and progression of tenant and resident participation needs to be managed in tandem with other parts of the Council's transformation agenda and will help to build the right customer insight to better shape the delivery of Council services.

### **BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS**

**All documents that have been used in compiling this report, may be available to the public, i.e. they do not contain exempt information, should be listed here:**

None

### **APPENDICES**

- 1 Proposed Scrutiny Arrangements for Housing Tenants and Residents
- 2 TPAS Resident Involvement Review
- 3 Community Involvement Framework
- 4 Glossary of Terms