

# Housing Resident Involvement Strategy for Exeter City Council

2012 - 2015

*The purpose of resident involvement  
is to improve services, deliver  
accountability and improve residents'  
quality of life*

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**Exeter City Council**

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## Introduction

The Council is actively committed to ensuring that resident involvement is at the heart of housing. It develops, promotes and encourages tenant and leaseholder participation and consultation in all aspects of housing service and provision.

The purpose of resident involvement is to find out the Council's tenant and leaseholders' priorities. This enables the service to focus the available resources into these areas and make efficiency savings elsewhere.

Changes to housing regulation in England from April 2012 require landlords to be more proactive in self-regulation and in involving tenants in the scrutiny process. In addition, the localism act envisages a greater role for service users at a local level to influence and scrutinise service delivery.

Housing resident involvement at Exeter City Council has undergone fundamental changes in the past year. Organisational change was implemented in 2010 to give a greater focus on working holistically across neighbourhoods and embedding resident involvement at the heart of service delivery. Part of this change involved transferring many of the Tenant Involvement Team's duties into the restructured Neighbourhood Management Team. Dedicated resident involvement staff were reduced from three to one to oversee the implementation of this strategy and maintain the resident governance structures that are currently in place (Restructure of Tenancy Services Team Report – Executive 14 Sept 2010).

This Strategy specifically focuses on housing resident involvement activities that relate to Exeter City Council's landlord function. Community engagement initiatives are developed across Exeter in conjunction with residents and partner agencies by the Community Involvement & Inclusion Officer. Responsibility within the housing department to link with this role and drive forward improvements within communities sits with the Neighbourhood Management team in the current housing management structure. The plan for how the Housing Service will be involved in the wider development of communities will be contained in the Neighbourhood Management Strategy.

The term ***hard to reach*** has been used throughout this document. The context of use relates to the demographic definition of tenants and leaseholders. Groups which the housing service has found difficult to engage with include, but are not restricted to; BME communities, people with disabilities and young people.

The term ***volunteer*** has been used in this document to describe those committed residents who give up their time willingly and without pay to improve the housing service delivered for the benefit of all residents.

This document will review the current resident involvement structure and activities, highlighting successes and areas that require improvement. The outcome of this review will inform the service priorities for the next three years. The final part of the Strategy takes the form of an action plan which sets out the practical steps that need to be taken to meet the aims of the strategy; what success will look like; how success can be measured and setting deadlines by which actions will be carried out.

## **Links to Corporate Objectives**

The Resident Involvement Strategy links to a number of Exeter City Council's corporate objectives:

- Ensure that we have high performing services which focus on customer needs
- Provide cost-effective services and proper use of resources
- Promote an extremely positive image and reputation and ensure high levels of customer satisfaction
- Listen to the community and respond to their needs
- Work with partners across and beyond the city to deliver better outcomes.

## **Benefits of Resident Involvement**

The benefits of resident involvement can be considerable. Audit Commission research in 2004 established clear evidence of benefits to the business, to tenant and leaseholders and to the wider community. The Council's tenants and leaseholders have said that they get the following benefits from being involved:

- They are provided with an opportunity to learn about the Housing Service
- They feel that the Council listens to and appreciates their views whilst also acting on them
- They are able to influence important decisions within the service
- They continue their professional lives in a voluntary capacity
- It encourages them to socialise and meet new people
- The service provides access to further training and development.

Greater accountability and value for money is achieved when tenants and leaseholders have input into service provision because people will get what they want. Involving them in the service enables the housing department to shape services to meet their needs.

## **Resident Involvement and Regulation**

Regulatory requirements for registered providers of social housing are set out by the Tenant Services Authority in its Regulatory Framework for Social Housing which came into effect in April 2010. Responsibility for regulating social housing passes to the Homes and Communities Agency from April 2012. The framework is based on the principle of co-regulation where there is a clear role for tenants to scrutinise performance.

The Housing Service is expected to support co-regulation by:

- Offering all tenants a wide range of opportunities to be involved in the management of their housing, including the ability to influence strategic priorities, the formulation of housing related policies, and the delivery of housing resident services
- Consulting with tenants and acting reasonably in providing them with opportunities to agree local offers for service delivery

- Providing tenants with a range of opportunities to scrutinise performance against all standards and in the development of the Annual Report
- Providing support to tenants to build their capacity to be more actively involved.

### **Local Offers**

The Housing Service consulted widely with tenants and leaseholders to assess their priorities and service requirements following the publication of the new standard. The results of this consultation created a set of 'Local Offers' promising certain levels of service. Each resident involvement activity should support the service's commitment to these standards:

- We will review the Resident Involvement Strategy to give you every opportunity to be involved with the service
- All important consultation will be clearly marked on the envelope with the Exeter City Council logo
- We will support the Tenant and Leaseholder Committee which represents your views
- We will support the Tenant Participation Agreement which spells out our approach to resident involvement
- We will provide some financial help for resident involvement
- We will provide advice, support, training and 'one-off' financial assistance to set up local residents associations
- We will provide information on the Exeter City Council website about resident involvement
- We will arrange an annual tenants' event
- We will give you every opportunity to get involved in decision making
- We will invite you to inspect the Housing Service and make recommendations for change
- We will involve you in monitoring our performance. We will deliver training and skills development to you if you are interested in getting involved
- We will form partnerships with other organisations to support resident involvement
- We will tell you about current issues
- We will ask you how satisfied you are with the overall service we provide every two years.

Local Offers are due to be reviewed in 2013

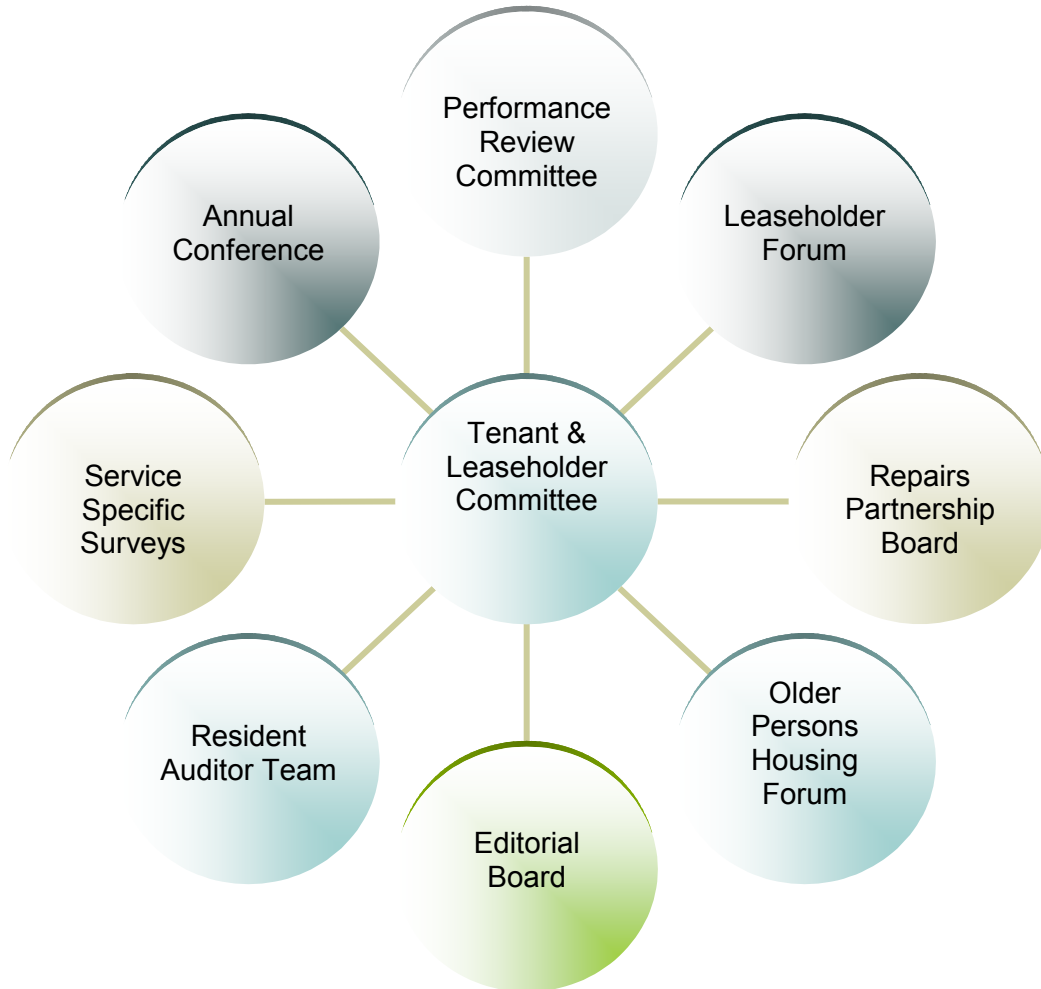
In addition to ensuring that the level of service promised in the 'Local Offers' document is met, the cost of delivering the service needs to be considered to ensure that tenant and leaseholders receive the maximum benefit from the available resources.

### **Localism Act**

The Localism Act, which gained royal assent in November 2011, contains a requirement for a 'democratic filter' to be developed to resolve more complaints at a local level. This will involve giving power to tenant's panels, Councillors or MPs to resolve complaints before they are referred to the Ombudsman.

## Current Structure

Since 2006, Exeter City Council has looked for new ways to involve tenants and leaseholders within the Housing Service. This commitment led to a formal resident involvement structure being created:



### Tenant & Leaseholder Committee (TALC)

The TALC is the strategic group for housing resident involvement. It is an elected committee that has members from each ward in the City. As residents, they are the experts in their local neighbourhoods and communities. The group meets monthly with housing managers and contractors to represent the views of tenants and leaseholders with reference to repairs, improvements of housing stock and conditions of tenancy. They make informed choices on behalf of all tenants and leaseholders. It has representatives on each of the working groups who report back to the committee. The group is well established and contains a good knowledge of the Housing Service and wider national issues. Project teams are created from the TALC membership to work with Housing Officers and Managers in the development of strategies, policies and procedures.

### Resident Auditor Team (RAT)

The RAT was established in 2006. The team take an in-depth review of processes and services, such as the voids process or complaints handling, that takes into account tenant, leaseholder and housing officer's views, customer experience data, benchmarking information and best practice data. They also carry out mystery shopping of the service. Recommendations are then made on how service delivery and value for money can be improved. Areas of review are decided by residents themselves or requested by housing managers. There is no current work-plan in place linked with planned service reviews.

### Editorial Board

The Editorial Board is responsible for writing and producing InSight, the quarterly magazine for residents. They also review all leaflets and newsletters produced by the Housing Service to ensure that they do not contain jargon and can be clearly understood.

### Performance Review Committee

This is a sub-group of the TALC. It helps to ensure that the housing services performance is open to regular scrutiny and can be challenged. The Council's Portfolio Holder for Housing & Social Inclusion and Chair of the Scrutiny Community are also part of this committee. Its meetings coincide with the publication of the Performance Digest for Housing. Managers take the committee through their own targets and answer questions on overall performance.

### Repairs Partnership Board

This group considers all aspects of repairs and maintenance within the Housing Service with the aim of influencing service direction and making decisions that relate to changes in policy.

### Older Persons Housing Forum

This forum represents older persons housing schemes within the City. It meets four times a year to discuss issues that impact on this type of accommodation.

### Leaseholder Forum

This forum meets twice a year providing an open session for leaseholders to meet with the Council and air their views.

### Service Specific Surveys and General Consultation

Surveys provide an opportunity to measure tenant and leaseholder satisfaction with specific areas of the service. The Housing Service also undertakes a range of consultation exercises where the provision of services will directly affect them or their neighbourhood. Examples include:

**Major Works Programme:** The Council has a comprehensive procedure for consulting its tenants and leaseholders prior to any improvement works starting in their homes.

**New Developments:** Tenants and leaseholders living in the neighbourhood near to new planned development sites will be fully consulted on the design of any planned

development. This is particularly important where the Council plans to develop smaller infill sites within existing housing estates.

**Environmental Improvements:** Fencing schemes, landscaping, demolition projects etc.

**Housing Management Issues:** Where a particular issue is affecting a neighbourhood, tenants and leaseholders will be consulted to ensure the full extent of the problem is understood and that proposed solutions are agreed jointly.

**Satisfaction Surveys:** Undertaken every two years to measure levels of satisfaction with the Housing Service. The results are used to inform service priorities. The last survey identified low levels of satisfaction on the outcomes of anti-social behaviour reports which led to a revision of the policy and procedures in place. The cleaning of communal areas was also introduced in response to the information gathered in the survey.

#### Annual conference

The annual conference has been running since 2007. They have been an opportunity for the housing service to obtain information to inform service priorities and for tenants and leaseholders to meet housing staff and their elected representatives to ask questions. Workshops have been held on issues ranging from anti-social behaviour to resident empowerment. Attendance has declined in recent years.

### **Review of the Resident Involvement Service**

The last comprehensive review of resident involvement was carried out in 2009 by the Resident Auditor Team; there are recommendations from this review that have not yet been implemented. There has been no individual evaluation of each component of the current structure carried out to assess its effectiveness.

#### **Access Customer care and User Focus**

##### *Staff knowledge and commitment to resident involvement*

A housing staff survey conducted in Nov 2011 found that 52% of staff felt that there is a commitment to resident involvement throughout the Housing Service. The organisational change described earlier has been put in place to address the separation in duties that is often felt between the day-to-day delivery of the service and resident involvement activities. Training for all housing staff would provide a better understanding of how resident involvement enhances service delivery and the role they play in involvement.

##### *Service standards and performance monitoring*

Monitoring is not currently undertaken to ensure that the involvement service is meeting the service standards outlined in the 'Local Offers' document.

##### *Resident's magazine*

Insight is produced four times per year by the Editorial Board. It contains information that the housing Service would like tenants and leaseholders to be made aware of and articles that the editorial board think will be of benefit. There is a lack of 'real-life' examples included in the magazine to illustrate the information being provided. The Council also has the facility to record the publication for which can be downloaded from



the internet as a podcast. This has not been utilised to date. There has been no evaluation of satisfaction levels with the publication.

#### *Other published information*

- Handbooks. All new tenants and leaseholders receive a handbook which provides comprehensive information on their rights and responsibilities and the ways in which they can be involved in, and influence service delivery
- Leaflets. A leaflet is available from the Civic Centre or can be downloaded from the website. No information is available on how many of these have been issued
- Exeter City Council website. There are dedicated pages on the internet. These pages are not well visited, with the front page only receiving 95 unique views in 2011.

The current published information is very traditional and relies on people engaging with the written word. Social networking is not currently utilised to promote resident involvement or engage with residents.

#### *Feedback to tenants and leaseholders on how the Housing Service has responded to their involvement*

Many changes have been made to the way in which housing services have been delivered as a result of involvement activities. A new standard for how properties are let has been put in place as a result of a review by the Resident Auditor Team. Tenants and leaseholders have been involved in the recruitment of senior housing officers and the appointment of major contracts. An area that could be improved relates to feedback to both those who have been actively involved as well as the wider tenant and leaseholder population. Inconsistency in giving feedback can lead to a loss of trust with volunteers and does not encourage others to get involved.

#### *Engaging service users*

There are a range of well established groups manned by committed tenants and leaseholders. The current structure is based on a traditional approach to involvement, with formal meetings and some more informal information sessions. Other methods of consultation that do not involve formal meetings are not currently utilised. The last customer satisfaction survey took place in 2008. 61% of tenants and leaseholders felt that their views were taken into account and 46% were satisfied with opportunities for participation.

The number of volunteers is low; there are currently 20 who are actively involved. It has been difficult to attract new membership to these formal groups. The current governance structure provides a good base to build upon, however, a new way of thinking that embraces less formal methods of engagement to attract more tenants and leaseholders, particularly those in traditionally hard to reach groups, needs to be embraced. These new methods of engagement will link into the established groups and the current volunteers will be involved in their design and the recruitment and training of volunteers. It is envisioned that some tenants and leaseholders who are initially engaged in these less formal methods will build confidence in their abilities and trust in the Housing Service and commit to more formal methods of engagement in the future.

### **Diversity**

All housing staff have received training in equality and diversity. Hard to reach groups are not represented well in the current structure. Previous efforts to increase involvement with these groups, by working with representative organizations, have not been successful. The new more informal methods of engagement will be promoted to hard to reach and under-represented groups. These methods will be developed to ensure that they are accessible for people across the seven strands of diversity. Tenant and leaseholder groups must become more ethnically diverse and appeal across the community.

### **Training and Support for Involvement Activities**

There is a dedicated budget to support training activities. This training has led to volunteers having an understanding of current housing issues enabling them to make insightful recommendations as well as challenging housing managers on performance issues.

Training has been focused mainly on individuals rather than developing group capacity. A training plan is not currently in place and evaluation of training activities is not routinely carried out. Individual performance reviews are also not undertaken with volunteers to ensure that their personal and training needs in relation to being involved are being met.

There is an expense policy in place to ensure that being involved does not leave volunteers out of pocket and that the time that they donate is recognized. This has not been reviewed to ensure that it remains fit for purpose.

### **Measuring Impact and Value for Money**

As noted above, the Housing Service is continually evolving to deliver a quality service that is valued due to the involvement of tenants and leaseholders. Unfortunately, the service has not been effective at collecting centralized data on the impact and no benchmarking activities have been undertaken to compare performance against similar organizations.

### **Housing Resident Involvement 2012 – 2015**

The Strategy for the next three years focuses on the following areas to ensure that effective tenant and leaseholder involvement is at the heart of housing at Exeter City Council, that the different levels of involvement are accessed by a representative cross-section of residents and that all regulatory requirements are met:

- Resident scrutiny and regulation
- Assessment of impact, structure and performance monitoring
- Increasing the numbers and diversity of residents actively involved
- Communication
- Training and support.

The purpose of resident involvement is to find out the Council's tenant and leaseholders' priorities. This enables the service to focus the available resources into these areas and make efficiency savings elsewhere. To meet this objective all involvement activities should meet at least one of the following aims:

- Provide feedback on current services
- Develop changes to services
- Scrutinise the services performance and hold managers to account.

#### Scrutiny and regulation

##### **Objectives**

- Develop scrutiny activities that comply with national guidance, involve new tenants and leaseholders in both a formal and consulting member capacity and other partner housing organizations as a critical friend
- Re-consultant on Local Offers in 2013
- Develop a 'democratic filter'.

#### Assessment of impact, structure and performance monitoring

##### **Objectives**

- Evaluate each component of the current structure for purpose, effectiveness and value for money
- Develop a new fit-for-purpose structure that embraces the ethos of co-regulation and represents the diversity of the tenant and leaseholder population
- Set performance indicators for the Resident Involvement Service and benchmark the results against similar landlords
- Create an involvement database that records and evaluates involvement activity that has taken place
- Undertake a value for money review of the new structure

#### Increasing the numbers and diversity of residents actively involved

##### **Objectives**

- Develop new less formal methods of engagement to compliment and feed into the formal structure with the intention of increasing the number of tenant and leaseholders who are providing feedback, developing change and holding the council to account for the services being delivered, ensuring that these methods are accessible across the seven strands of diversity.
- Utilise social media and the internet, e.g. online surveys, to engage with residents
- Monitor the demographics of those involved to ensure that that they are representative of the tenant and leaseholder population.
- Target hard-to-reach and under-represented groups in recruitment campaigns
- Produce recruitment information, utilising traditional and new media to attract more residents.

#### Communication

##### **Objectives**

- Utilise social networking to promote tenant and leaseholder involvement and support the existing communication methods in place
- Record publications and make available for download as a podcast

- Address the lack of feedback currently provided by developing and monitoring feedback mechanisms to inform volunteers and the wider tenant and leaseholder population and staff on the impact that involvement has had on the service.
- Investigate the use of new media such as live/video feeds as a form of feedback and communication with tenant and leaseholders.

#### Training and support

##### **Objectives**

- Deliver training to all housing staff on how resident involvement enhances service delivery and the role that they play in this process
- Develop a structured tenant and leaseholder involvement training program that focus on both individual and group knowledge, development and capacity building and ensure that training is accessible to all groups.
- Develop a training recording and evaluation database
- Introduce an appraisal system to ensure that personal and training needs are being met.
- Review the expenses policy to ensure that it is fit-for-purpose and takes account of the new methods of involvement that are being developed