

REPORT TO: PEOPLE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE and EXECUTIVE

Date of Meeting: 5 January 2017 and 10 January 2017

Report of: Assistant Director Housing

Title: Tenant and Leaseholder Involvement and Communication Strategy 2016 - 2020

Is this a Key Decision?

Yes

Is this an Executive or Council Function?

Executive

1. What is the report about?

The report presents the new Tenant and Leaseholder Involvement and Communication Strategy which replaces the former Housing Resident Involvement Strategy which operated from 2012 – 2015.

The report also seeks endorsement for the Housing Service's 5 Key Pledges (Local Offer) – the HRA's service standard commitments to council tenants and leaseholders.

2. Recommendations:

That Scrutiny Committee note, and Executive approve:

2.1 The adoption of the new Tenant and Leaseholder Involvement and Communication Strategy 2016 – 2020.

2.2 The adoption of the Housing Service's 5 Key Pledges (Local Offers)

3. Reasons for the recommendations:

The existing strategy is now out of date and refers to structures within the Housing Service that are no longer operational. The procedures in this document do not reflect the current system of working with tenants and leaseholders. The new revised strategy has been written in conjunction with tenants and leaseholder representatives who sit on the Performance Scrutiny Partnership. It has been designed to be both a policy document as well as being user-friendly and accessible to the Council's tenants and leaseholders.

A new set of Local Offers (essentially service standards) has been agreed with the Performance Scrutiny Partnership. These new offers replace a very long list of offers that were not well-known or useful either to residents or staff.

4. What are the resource implications including non financial resources.

There will be no extra costs incurred as a result of adopting this strategy or adopting the new local offers. The new strategy and local offers will be implemented by existing staff within Housing using existing resources.

5. Section 151 Officer comments:

5.1 There are no financial implications contained in this report.

6. What are the legal aspects?

None identified

7. Monitoring Officer's comments:

This report raises no issues of concern to the Monitoring officer.

8. Report details:

8.1 Background: Strategy

Exeter City Council owns and manages almost 5,000 homes across the City. The Housing Service has a good working relationship with its tenants and leaseholders but in order for this relationship to thrive and develop in changing circumstances there needs to be a formal strategy in place.

The existing 'Housing Resident Involvement Strategy' covered the period 2012-2015 but now does not reflect current working practices within the organisation nor is it up to date with best practice across the housing sector.

The new strategy will help to create links with residents so that a more customer-focused Housing Service, which is responsive to the needs of our tenants and leaseholders, can operate. The strategy provides the opportunity and means for residents to have a say in the way that the service functions.

The existing strategy is a long, formal document designed for internal use by officers only. The revised document has been designed to be both a policy document and a user-friendly booklet that can be distributed to, and used by, tenants and leaseholders.

The existing strategy outlined the complex nature of the formal resident involvement structures that existed within the Housing Service at the time. There were six groups of participating residents who dealt with issues from different parts of the Service from repairs and maintenance to leaseholders and older persons. These all fed into a Tenant and Leaseholder Committee. This structure was, by its sheer size, very bureaucratic and consumed a lot of staff time and resources.

The new strategy reflects current working practices including scrutiny of the Housing Service which is now provided by the Performance Scrutiny Partnership. This group enables tenants and leaseholders to question the decisions and performance of the service so that, through collaboration and effective challenge, improvements can be made.

The new strategy appears as Appendix A to this report.

8.2 Background: Local Offers

We have included the Local Offers in this report as their creation and adoption are linked to resident involvement.

Local Offers (which are essentially service standards set by social landlords and agreed with tenants and leaseholders) were promoted by the Government via the Tenant Services Authority in 2010. We originally adopted over 100 local offers in 2011.

These standards were comprehensive but were difficult to measure let alone to demonstrate compliance.

In 2015 the newly constituted Performance Scrutiny Partnership looked at the current Local Offers and worked with Housing managers and staff to produce a much shorter more focussed list together with the measures to be used to assess whether we were meeting these new standards or not.

These offers (called 'pledges') appear as Appendix C to this report.

8.3 Consultation and the review process

Detailed discussions have taken place with both the users of the housing service (tenants and leaseholders) as represented by the Performance Scrutiny Partnership, and the staff who have the operational responsibility for resident involvement (the Housing Services team).

It was decided early on in the review process not just to update the original strategy, but to start afresh, drawing on best practice from other registered social landlords, particularly local authorities who still manage their own stock.

The consensus of opinion was to produce a user-friendly document which could be used both as a formal strategy and as a guide for new and existing tenants and leaseholders.

The new strategy details the system of resident involvement as it currently operates and sets out the vision for the future.

As stated in 8.2 above, the new Local Offers have been arrived at through joint working with the Performance Scrutiny Partnership.

8.4 Content summary

The **strategy** establishes the direction for the future of tenant and leaseholder involvement. The vision is clearly stated:

It is important and beneficial that tenants and leaseholders are able to participate in the shaping of our housing service. We believe that partnership working can have a positive impact on lives and communities. We offer a range of opportunities to enable this to take place.

The aim of the strategy is to offer residents a variety of potential routes for involvement. In addition it seeks to increase the number and diversity of involved residents.

It contains a menu of involvement, allowing tenants and leaseholders to choose from being members of a formal group for collective influence, or to participate in more informal activities and events which provide opportunities for individual feedback.

The benefits of involvement for the service and for the individual are clearly set out and it proposes providing training to support participation. There are a number of established neighbourhood and tenant groups across the city and it is the intention of the strategy to encourage and support more groups such as these.

The strategy outlines the Housing Service's current arrangements and proposes improvements in communication with tenants and leaseholders. Such improvements will focus on developing digital contacts through email and social media while not forgetting more traditional methods of communication, especially face-to-face contacts between staff and residents.

There is an action plan for the strategy attached at Appendix B.

The **Local Offers** (also described as 'pledges') are summarised as follows:

1. Repairs and maintenance
We pledge to provide safe, well-maintained homes
2. Neighbourhood and community
We pledge to work in partnership with other organisations to create neighbourhoods which are safe and well maintained, and where people want to live
3. Tenancy
We pledge to work with tenants and leaseholders to ensure all terms and conditions of our tenancies are understood and complied with
4. Lettings
We pledge to let our properties promptly, fairly and consistently in order to meet housing need and help create sustainable communities
5. Equality, diversity and access
In order to meet all our pledges we will involve our residents, and provide services which are fair, equitable and accessible

Full details are provided at Appendix C.

9. How does the decision contribute to the Council's Corporate Plan?

The Corporate Plan states that 'Housing is a key priority for the city. We will work closely with our tenants to improve their homes and quality of life.'

This strategy complements our corporate strategic objectives:

- To examine alternatives for communicating with and engaging tenants and leaseholders
- To support Exeter's communities
- To provide services to meet customers' needs
- To work with community and voluntary groups who have an important role to play in helping shape and deliver services.

The Local Offers will also contribute to these objectives.

10. What risks are there and how can they be reduced?

There are no significant financial or operational risks. The overall risk that the Council fails to engage with its tenants and leaseholders in a meaningful and effective way and thereby reduces customer satisfaction and operational efficiency are addressed in the strategy itself and in the Local Offers.

11. What is the impact of the decision on equality and diversity; health and wellbeing; safeguarding children, young people and vulnerable adults, community safety and the environment?

There will be a positive impact on health and wellbeing, and on vulnerable adults, from the proposals in the strategy for improving communication and bringing communities together.

All groups will benefit from the Local Offers which commit Housing to provide high standards of service to tenants and leaseholders.

12. Are there any other options?

We are obliged to engage with and involve residents by the Regulatory Framework under which we operate as a Registered Provider. We also believe it is the right thing to do as it tends to lead to better services and higher rates of customer satisfaction.

There are many ways of engaging residents, but officers feel the methods described in the strategy represent the best options currently available.

We are likewise obliged to provide residents with information about the standards of housing services they can expect. The Local Offers will form part of that information (information about standards of service is also contained in other Housing publications such as the Tenants' Handbook).

Assistant Director Housing

Local Government (Access to Information) Act 1972 (as amended)

Background papers used in compiling this report:-

None

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