

Exeter City Council Housing and Development Resident Involvement Strategy 2021 - 2025

Introduction

What is resident involvement?

We are committed to working with our tenants to produce responsive and cost-effective services that meet a variety of needs. These services range from providing, maintaining and improving properties to supporting tenants living in their homes. Such support includes offering help and advice on contractual rights and duties; cleaning communal areas; maintaining landscaped parts; making adaptations to properties for people with disabilities; tackling anti-social behaviour and so on.

Involvement activities might range from us informing residents of work we are going to do, to residents being actively involved in decisions and even running services in their neighbourhoods, and all the levels in between.

In this Strategy we have used the word 'residents' to include both Exeter City Council tenants and leaseholders.

Why is it important?

We think that resident involvement is important because it leads to many benefits for both residents and the council.

We think good resident involvement can:

- Help provide services that residents actually want
- Improve communication and understanding between landlord and residents
- Improve the health and well-being of residents
- Encourage a greater sense of community
- Provide training and development opportunities that lead to gaining new skills and qualifications

- Reduce anti-social behaviour (ASB)
- Improve the local neighbourhood

National context

1. The Regulator of Social Housing (a body backed by the Government that watches over social landlords to make sure they are well run) expects social landlords such as Exeter City Council to involve tenants in:

- Forming policies
- Making decisions about how housing-related services are delivered
- Examining and commenting on how well their landlord is performing
- How repairs, maintenance and improvements are carried out
- Agreeing standards of service delivery.

The Council is expected to:

- Support tenant panels or other groups of residents working together
- Provide relevant performance information
- Provide support to tenants to help them to build their skills.

Government policy

The Government's White Paper released in 2020 marked a significant change in Government policy. Resident involvement was a key theme, and an increased role for residents has been proposed for a number of areas, including:

- To be safe in your home
- To know how your landlord is performing
- To have your complaints dealt with promptly and fairly
- To be treated with respect
- To have your voice heard by your landlord
- To have a good quality home and neighbourhood to live in
- To be supported to take your first step to home ownership

Local context

1. Exeter City Council's Corporate Plan has the following priorities:
 - A. Delivering net zero Exeter 2030
 - B. Promoting active and healthy lifestyles
 - C. Building great neighbourhoods

D. Providing value-for-money services

E. Leading a well-run council

Working successfully with our tenants can contribute to all of these priorities.

Housing Strategy

Our present Housing Strategy (currently under review) makes the following points:

- A. We believe that residents should have a number of opportunities to influence and affect the Housing Service's policies; decision-making; performance; management and maintenance of the properties; and standards of service
- B. We are committed to involving residents. For example the Performance Scrutiny Partnership (PSP), although currently adjourned, is a group of tenants and leaseholders who review services and performance, and provide recommendations and feedback.
- C. We are committed to being more than just a landlord. This involves:
 - Developing partnerships with local voluntary and charitable groups to deliver more appropriate and affordable services
 - Boosting resident capacity to help people improve their own lives
 - Tackling fuel poverty
 - Maximising income, especially welfare benefits
 - Addressing health and well-being matters, particularly issues around loneliness and isolation
 - Minimising anti-social behaviour.

Exeter City Council Survey of Tenants and Residents (STAR 2019).

In 2019 Exeter City Council commissioned M·E·L Research to carry out a Survey of Tenants and Residents (STAR) to gather feedback from residents. The aim was to gain a better understanding of the levels of satisfaction residents have with their homes and the services provided.

The results showed:

- A. Satisfaction with the neighbourhood has gone up
- B. Overall satisfaction with the repairs service is down
- C. Satisfaction with advice on welfare benefits is down
- D. Satisfaction with being able to make their views known is down significantly
- E. People are contacting the Housing Service a lot less
- F. Getting hold of the right person seems to be harder, and the staff seem to be less helpful
- G. People are significantly happier with the cleaning of internal and external communal areas
- H. Although people are still concerned in the main by car parking problems; rubbish and dog fouling, they are not as concerned as they were four years ago
- I. In terms of anti-social behaviour people are a lot happier with all aspects of the service
- J. In terms of the repairs service, it seems the biggest concern is about being able to make an appointment
- K. Service priorities for residents are:
 - Repairs and maintenance (77%)
 - Overall quality of the home (57%)
 - Keeping residents informed (40%)
 - Listening to residents' views and acting on them (31%)
 - Dealing with anti-social behaviour (24%)
 - Value for money (rent and service charges) (24%)
 - Neighbourhood as a place to live (20%)
- L. In terms of internet access, 43% of tenants do not use the internet for a number of reasons
- M. In terms of complaints this is the first time we have collected data so we cannot compare performance to that of 2015 however satisfaction levels could have been higher.

To sum up - this Strategy intends to:

- Offer residents the opportunity to work with us to develop and improve our services in a way that suits residents
- Follow all Government guidance and requirements
- Support Exeter City Council's Corporate Plan
- Support the Housing Service's overall aims and objectives
- Take account of the latest STAR (satisfaction) Survey which told us the areas that residents would like us to improve (e.g. our repairs service and keeping residents informed).

This Strategy focuses on communicating with and involving ECC tenants and leaseholders. Wider aspects of community involvement will be covered in our forthcoming Neighbourhood Strategy.

Current arrangements for resident involvement

At the moment residents may become involved with the work of the Housing Service in the following ways:

1. The Performance Scrutiny Partnership (PSP) - a body comprising a number of tenants and leaseholders which meets roughly once a month to scrutinise performance and to undertake *ad hoc* projects relating to service improvement (this group is temporarily adjourned pending the adoption of this new Strategy)
2. An Editorial Board – a group of residents who help produce the residents' magazine *Insight*
3. One Tenants' Association based at Rennes House
4. The opportunity to comment on specific initiatives via surveys, focus groups, complaints
5. Attending community-based events.

Current Resources available

The Housing Service currently employs one Resident Involvement Officer together with one part-time Housing Community Partnerships Officer. These staff deliver the existing resident involvement and community engagement services, supported by the Council's Housing Officers.

We have a small budget for both resident involvement and community engagement activities and projects. We have concentrated in the last few years on tackling loneliness and isolation among our older residents but wish to broaden our approach in the future.

Apart from specific projects we have also funded:

- participants' travel expenses, childcare and carer's costs
- room hire, invitations, flyers and posters for meetings and events
- the provision of support and advice to participants
- administrative support for tenants' groups e.g. for photocopying, printing etc.

How we arrived at this Strategy

Residents' Survey

A survey was conducted across all of Exeter City Council's tenants and leaseholders regarding resident involvement to find out what was important to them and what they were most interested in. 555 people responded to the survey which was an excellent response rate at approximately 10%. The majority were tenants (85%); 15% of the respondents were Leaseholders.

Key findings:

- A. Residents were mainly interested in repairs and maintenance. They were also interested in skills around the home, anti-social behaviour, cleansing and recycling
- B. Around half of the respondents would like to receive information on these subjects
- C. 80% of the respondents were happy to take part in short surveys. The majority stated that they would prefer to receive the survey in the form of a letter. Only 3% wanted to undertake a survey via social media and 32% would take part via email
- D. 133 respondents said they would be interested in being part of a group representing residents in voicing opinions, concerns, and recommendations on topics of interest
- E. 90% of respondents wanting to be in a group felt they would be confident enough to take part in such a group

- F. 15% of respondents said that they would like to be representatives to voice opinions/concerns on behalf of residents and to formally scrutinise housing performance
- G. 21% of respondents said that they would be encouraged to become involved if there were financial support for taxis or childcare
- H. 47 respondents said they would like support to get online to participate.

Conclusions

It was encouraging to see that there was considerable interest from residents in becoming involved in the work of the Housing Service.

On this basis it was decided to run a short series of focus groups concentrating on areas identified in the STAR Survey as being those of relatively low satisfaction. This was both to understand why people had expressed some dissatisfaction and also to potentially recruit a number of interested residents with whom we could consult in the future.

One area which surprised the Team was the low level of digital engagement among residents. 43% did not have access to the internet either through choice or circumstances (this percentage may have decreased over the past few months as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic). This was identified as an area that needed attention in the future.

It was also clear from the findings that residents were keen to be kept informed on what was happening within Housing and their neighbourhood. So the continuation of *Insight* magazine, featuring a variety of articles and subjects was something that should be supported.

Focus Groups

Four focus groups were run in the latter part of 2019 and the early part of 2020. These focus groups covered:

1. An introduction to resident involvement
2. Repairs and maintenance
3. Service standards and complaints
4. Leasehold properties

All these focus groups provided invaluable information, ideas and insight which have been carried forward to this strategy and should also improve our day-to-day services.

Purpose and objectives of this Strategy

Using what we have learnt, we believe that our approach should be to:

1. Promote and support more resident involvement

- Understand what type of activities residents would like to be involved in
- Provide residents a range of opportunities to become involved
- Run residents' open days and other events of all kinds
- Encourage and support the formation of residents' groups if this is what people would like
- Try to understand the best ways to encourage residents to work with us in ways that they find rewarding
- Promote a sense of community and local pride.

2. Use what we are told to improve our services

- Embed resident involvement as part of business planning and shaping services
- Encourage resident representation on the proposed Council Housing and Development Advisory Board (this is a new group we have recently set up which includes elected Councillors; external expert advisors and tenant representation to advise us on how to improve our services)
- Enable tenants and leaseholders to have direct influence over housing strategy, policy, standards, and performance targets, matching these to residents' priorities
- Ensure that tenants and leaseholders are involved in performance monitoring and management, learning from performance information provided and improving services through effective challenge
- Involve residents in the procurement of goods and services (e.g. repairs contractors).

3. Set up projects that will help local communities

- Help to create and maintain successful, vibrant communities
- Understand community priorities and find solutions within the community itself
- Support communities to develop the capacity to address their issues
- Link community engagement to the Council's wider priorities and help communities to access the Exeter Grants Programme
- Promote financial, social and digital inclusion amongst communities and provide appropriate access to Council resources to enable this.

4. Support residents individually

- Offer resident training/capacity building
- Provide appropriate levels of support for involved tenants and leaseholders so they can be effective in their roles (e.g. mentoring)
- Train and develop staff across the housing service, equipping them with the skills needed to promote resident involvement.

5. Improve the way we communicate with residents

- Provide information to residents in ways they choose, gather their views and use them to inform the direction of their services
- Creation of a beneficial 'feedback loop' to provide residents with tangible evidence of the benefits of engagement via *Insight* magazine, social media and other methods
- Encourage greater use of new technologies (Zoom meetings or similar, web, email, social media, text messaging, mobile apps etc.) to increase access to information and to allow feedback and ideas to be shared in a digital/virtual way
- Promote opportunities for tenant and leaseholder involvement, using a variety of media channels, including print, web, social media and events
- Show the positive impact involved tenants have on the service.

6. Promote fairness and equality

- Promote involvement from all residents irrespective of their personal characteristics and to do our best to ensure that everyone can contribute
- Recognise that some people and groups find it difficult to have their voices heard and work to find ways to hear those voices
- Tailor opportunities for involvement to meet different needs/expectations (e.g. meetings at different times and locations; communication via technology; payment of expenses, caring services etc.).

7. Measure our performance better

- Develop measurements so that we can tell if we are being successful in meeting our aims
- Develop methods to measure social value and value for money of any projects we undertake
- Enable residents to monitor the progress of this Strategy through regular consultation
- Evaluate and publicise the changes brought about through resident involvement and share them with staff, tenants, leaseholders, communities and stakeholder organisations
- Undertake regular impact assessments.

What would we like resident involvement to look like by 2025?

We would hope to have achieved the following by 2025 if not sooner:

1. A new resident involvement structure that enables residents to choose how they want to get involved and to what extent
2. Regular resident events such as fetes, open days, gardening projects etc.
3. Some new thriving local residents' groups
4. Resident Involvement as part of all our activities to influence in a positive way our core business and services
5. Residents actively scrutinising performance and undertaking their own projects to improve services
6. Increased resident satisfaction levels with being listened to and having their views taken into account
7. Successful community engagement projects being undertaken with residents to meet local needs
8. Regular tenant training being provided to increase capacity
9. Improved two way communication, especially via internet, smartphone and social media
10. Better publicity to show what can be achieved through successful resident involvement
11. Involvement from all parts of the community particularly those who have been unrepresented in the past to create a truly diverse group of involved residents
12. An accepted way of measuring if we are being successful.

Conclusion

We hope that this new Strategy gives a real opportunity for the Council and our tenants and leaseholders to work together in partnership to deliver a great housing service.

We are pleased by the way residents and staff have shaped this Strategy. We have listened to residents through surveys, focus groups and individually. Their priorities together with those of the Government and Council form the basis of this plan.

We believe that the key aims of the Strategy and the Action Plan that underpins it will, over the next four years, return real benefits to all concerned.

By promoting and supporting resident involvement and community engagement; by improving communication; by involving all members of the community; and by embedding involvement into our core business, we believe we can help improve the health, well-being and prosperity of residents and the strength, vibrancy and success of local communities.