

REPORT TITLE: HOUSING ENGAGEMENT AND COMMUNICATION PLAN

5 FEBRUARY 2024

REPORT OF CABINET MEMBER: Cllr Chris Westwood, Cabinet Member for Housing

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WARD(S): ALL

### PURPOSE

'Listening better' is a priority identified within the Council Plan and the Social Housing (Regulation) Act 2023 provides an important foundation for giving tenants a greater voice and focuses on ensuring that all tenants are heard by their landlord.

It is an ambition of the HRA Housing Service to improve engagement with all its tenants. Looking at new channels and ways of communicating, digital surveys were introduced under the previous engagement strategy to expand the range of households who actively engage with the council. While these have been successful in engaging a more diverse mix of tenants; the service is keen to extend the reach of our tenants ensuring that the tenant voice is at the heart of the service.

In November 2023 the Listening Better survey tested the various initiatives and found that younger households favoured options that were quick and digital. The survey also tested interest in an Advisory Board under the Tenant and Council Together banner.

This paper is the next stage in the review process, recommending a new tenant structure under the branding of Tenant and Council Together (TACT) and programme of informal activities. The structure proposal is in place to hold the council to account, and to identify any service delivery critical issues and improvement areas. The proposed structure provides for co-production work with residents and provides forums for representative and impactful resident engagement to ensure that the tenant voice is at the heart of the service.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

That Cabinet Committee: Housing agree:

1. To establish the TACT Board.
2. The terms of reference for the TACT Board as at Appendix 6.
3. That non-councillor TACT board members will receive compensation for attendance at the TACT board.
4. To approve the Housing Engagement and Communication Plan.

## IMPLICATIONS:

### 1 COUNCIL PLAN OUTCOME

- 1.1 Tackling the Climate Emergency and Creating a Greener District
- 1.2 Effective engagement and communication with tenants are key to the success of the programme to decarbonise housing. It directly affects the interest in changing to low carbon systems and once installed ensures maximum benefit can be derived through how they are operated.
- 1.3 Homes for all
- 1.4 Housing provision can be improved by listening to tenants' views on what's important to them and their housing.
- 1.5 Vibrant Local Economy
- 1.6 Good housing and strong local communities link with vibrant local economies. Making it easy for tenants and other residents to give the council their views and then using this information to structure how the council operates and how the service it provides impacts on the economy.
- 1.7 Living Well
- 1.8 The connection with housing provision and living well is well established. The importance of a structure and processes that enable tenants to easily talk to their housing landlord about their housing issues is crucial and has most recently been highlighted through Awaab's Law. The law requires all landlords to fix reported health and safety hazards within a strict timeframe. Good engagement is fundamental and should reach all household groups to achieve the goal of ensuring everyone is heard when designing policies, processes, and improvements and when agreeing service priorities. This plan aims to address the weaknesses and gaps of current structure.
- 1.9 Your Services, Your Voice
- 1.10 The aim of the new engagement plan is to widen the reach of those working with the council to develop services and engage those seldom heard to improve the diversity of views on which housing service improvements and priorities are determined. This ensures that the tenant voice is heard in housing service delivery and informs continuous improvement opportunities.

### 2 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 2.1 CAB3429 (H) set out that responding to what tenants said through the tenants' satisfaction survey would require investment in developing digital capabilities. While the housing service is currently exploring the options and opportunities available within current systems its understood that investment maybe required to address identified limitations and provision has been made

for this is included in the HRA Business Plan. Costs associated with training to develop the skills required to enable involved tenants to challenge the council's landlord performance, actively collaborate with service development and design can be contained within existing budgets.

### 3 LEGAL AND PROCUREMENT IMPLICATIONS

- 3.1 In addition to improving how the engagement service operates; these changes are also aimed at preparing the council for the new regulation regime set out in the Social (Housing) Regulation Act 2023.
- 3.2 The role of TACT has been part of the council's governance arrangements since 1995.
- 3.3 The intention is to retain the TACT brand but to update how it operates. The current arrangements where involved tenants link in closely with the governance of the council is recognised as good practice and valuable. The changes are aimed at strengthening how this operates.
- 3.4 Any procurement required because of this report will be conducted in accordance with the Council's Contract Procedure Rules (CPRs) and the Public Contract Regulations 2015 (PCR2015).

### 4 WORKFORCE IMPLICATIONS

- 4.1 The plan has been designed in reference to what can be achieved within existing resources. The formal and informal activities set out in the HECP will be supported by tenant involvement officers.
- 4.2 As stated in BHP40 customer insight and good data management has been a recurring message throughout the research. Investing in a resource to lead on this function would equip the service to meet future demands and operate with improved efficiency and effectiveness. This priority for investment was confirmed as a recommendation in the Housing Quality Network review. The Regulator for Social Housing has an expectation that housing providers know who their customers are and what's important to them to enable providers to design services around them and target resources appropriately.

### 5 PROPERTY AND ASSET IMPLICATIONS

- 5.1 Tenants' views are integral to how HRA assets are used and maintained.
- 5.2 The feedback from tenants through the 2023 satisfaction survey clearly identifies repairs and maintenance of the home as a driver to overall satisfaction and many used the open text opportunity to raise issues around communication and respecting the views of tenants in relation to work to properties. This reinforced the verbal feedback given at the Listening to Views focus groups held in the summer of 2022.

5.3 Effective engagement and collaboration in the design of processes therefore has key implications for property and asset management.

## 6 CONSULTATION AND COMMUNICATION

6.1 Ensuring residents' voices are heard was a central theme of the Government's social housing white paper which was developed in conversation with tenants across the country. Listening better is a corporate priority for the council and is at the heart of everything it does.

6.2 Comprehensive engagement has been a core part of the review of tenant involvement and development of the HECF and comprised of numerous activities. Details of each stage and the outcomes were set out in Appendix 1 of BHP40. Consultation that has taken place since the Business and Housing Policy meeting in February is presented in Appendix 2.

6.3 Housing Quality Network, engaged to conduct an independent review of the draft HECF following Business and Housing Policy Committee, made various recommendations to address the shortcomings of the current approach to tenant involvement which included suggestions for making the formal structure more inclusive. The HQN findings and recommendations were presented to TACT at feedback sessions in August and discussed with TACT at their AGM in September 2023 and a new structure drafted on this basis. This draft structure was sent to TACT Committee as well as being presented to the Tenant Involvement Steering Group on 3 October 2023.

6.4 The proposed new informal initiatives in the draft plan and interest in the proposed Board were tested through an online survey in November 2023. The results of the survey are presented in section 12.

6.5 The draft structure was discussed with TACT on 11 January 2024. Their comments and response were as follows:

- Direct communication with officers is valued and it's important that changes to the engagement structure continues to provide that opportunity.
- How would tenants go about raising service queries with officers through the new structure or requesting to hear from officers delivering specific elements of the service.
- A group that operates as a higher level of scrutiny is needed but this needs to operate so that it doesn't alienate the other groups in the structure.
- How would the council go about ensuring that the Board was diverse?
- The structure needs to operate to facilitate 2-way feedback between the consumer service groups and the Board.
- Concerns over whether there would be sufficient interest in joining the Consumer Delivery Groups as the council struggles to get sufficient interest in the current Service Delivery Groups

- Whether it would be possible to keep both the new TACT Board and the existing TACT Group
- Clarification is required on the whether the Board is recruited or elected as well as the frequency of meetings.
- Concerns were raised over the impact of compensation on benefits.
- Ensure other means of incentivising involvement are offered in addition to financial ones.
- Recognition that the Board follows a similar model to that operated by registered social housing providers.

6.6 Responses given at the meeting to the feedback were as follows: -

- Opportunities for face-to-face conversations with council officers is still provided in the new structure especially through the Consumer Standards Groups but needs to be balanced with the informal activities that collect views from a wider group of tenants and provides feedback opportunities for those for whom face to face meetings are unattractive
- The responses to the Listening Better survey were that compensation would attract younger households and therefore potentially more inclusive of those with different lived experiences. *Promoting the opportunities through diverse methods would be key.*
- Facilitating involvement groups in addition to those proposed would make demands on officer resources that it would not be possible to accommodate within existing resources.
- Places on the board would be determined through a recruitment exercise against clearly specified roles.

## 7 ENVIRONMENTAL CONSIDERATIONS

7.1 The environmental impact of the plan is considered low; however, engagement activities aim to be sustainable, ethical, and local wherever possible. Including transport and printing policies and putting an emphasis on using local suppliers for catering and gifts of appreciation.

## 8 PUBLIC SECTOR EQUALITY DUTY

8.1 As set out in BHP40 the premise of the plan is to improve the representative profile of engaged households by having measures in place to tackle the things that may prevent people from sharing their views with the council: it aims to ensure all households are equally able to influence the service they receive.

8.2 The impact assessment looked beyond the potential disadvantage, based on the protected characteristics set out in the act but also considered measures required to ensure that the plan was inclusive of other groups such as those living in rural communities, those with caring responsibilities, those living on low income and those digitally excluded and with limited access to transport.

- 8.3 The original impact assessment on the draft plan completed on 17.01.23. A desktop refresh was carried out in January 2024 following the changes made in reference to the findings of the HQN Review and the feedback to the Listening Better survey Nov 2023.
- 8.4 The changes made, focus on activities and structural changes which are more likely to appeal to younger households or households the council seldom hears from.

## 9 DATA PROTECTION IMPACT ASSESSMENT (DPIA)

- 9.1 The approach taken in general to ensure compliance with data protection legislation is set out in the Tenant Involvement Team's policies and procedures. These are supplemented by DPIA exercises for specific engagement activities such as the Tenant Satisfaction Survey.

## 10 RISK MANAGEMENT

- 10.1 The main risks to the delivery of the plan outcomes broadly depend on the following: -
- a) Commitment and drive from the senior management team to provide the resources required and respect the priority of the programme of work against competing tasks.
  - b) Experienced and skilled engagement team
  - c) Good communication with existing involved tenants to explain the reasons for change, how this will benefit all tenants along with their role and the importance of their continued involvement under the structure introduced to address the improvement needed.
  - d) All housing staff recognise that engagement is their responsibility too and embrace the role they play.
  - e) Recruiting tenants with the skills required to meet the expectations of formal roles.

<b>Risk</b>	<b>Mitigation</b>	<b>Opportunities</b>
Financial Exposure: Minimal risk of non-compliance with regulatory requirements leading to fines.	Proposals contained in this and other reports to reduce the low risk of fines.	
Exposure to challenge: Low	Engagement and consultation with stakeholders reduce the already low risk of	

	challenge to adoption of the plan.	
Innovation None		
Reputation  Failing to meet the requirements of the Regulator of Social Housing to ensure that engagement is representative of all household groups.  Not providing evidence that tenants' views have been heard and have influenced service provision.	Commitment and support from service leads to deliver the plan.  A Communication plan that includes a variety of feedback mechanisms which include social media, webpage, and direct email feedback along with newsletters and annual reports.	The Council's reputation could be enhanced if engagement and communication improve and is more tailored to individuals' preferences – greater use of digital channels for example.
Achievement of outcome  The plan brings a change to a structure that has been in place for many years, and some may find the change challenging which could inhibit the delivery of the plan despite the sound basis on which the new structure has been based on and the need for compliance.  All housing staff don't recognise that engagement is part of their role.  Relies on other teams recognising the	Collaboration in the design of the refreshed structure.  Clear communication of the basis on which changes are proposed.  Consultation which is representative and engages those seldom heard.  Strong senior management team that leads and embeds the principles of engagement.	Engagement of new households to provide a wider range of viewpoints to be better informed when determining service improvements which should lead to better designed services that benefits all stakeholders, staff, and residents.

<p>importance of customer respect and listening better when delivering their services on overall performance.</p> <p>Success depends on involved tenants with appropriate skills to meet the challenge of the roles.</p>	<p>Investment in customer excellence training for all housing staff.</p> <p>Job descriptions clearly set out the expectations of the roles for Board representatives along with terms of reference which sets out the commitment required.</p> <p>Approach to recruitment that works to reach those with the skills required.</p> <p>Skills audit, training plans, induction processes and mentoring support from engagement officers.</p>	
Property - None		
Community Support – none		<p>Locally based engagement activities provide an ideal opportunity to raise awareness of support available or gaps in provision.</p>
<p>Timescales and Project capacity</p> <p>Success depends on: -</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Recruitment and retention of appropriately skilled team engagement team.</li> <li>• Plan delivery being allocated a priority within work programmes.</li> </ul>	<p>Plan driven and monitored by senior management.</p> <p>Commitment from Housing DMT, Strategic Leads and other stakeholders to</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• allocate the resources required to deliver the Plan.</li> <li>• Delivery of the plan recognised as a work</li> </ul>	

• Plus, commitment and support from all staff and involved tenants	programme priority against competing projects and tasks	
Other – none		

## 11 SUPPORTING INFORMATION:

11.1 The white paper a Charter for Social Housing and the Social Housing (regulation) Act 2023, is a driver a change and sets the following requirements:

- a) Tenant voice to be at the heart of housing providers' service.
- b) Engagement to be representative and impactful.

11.2 New customer standards sit alongside the Social Housing Regulation Act. They require landlords to be open with residents and treat them with fairness and respect so that they can access services, raise complaints, when necessary, influence decision-making and hold their landlords to account.

Tenant Satisfaction Measures (TSMs) help show how well social housing landlords are doing at providing good quality homes and services. They help tenants hold their landlords to account and landlords must show the results of their surveys. 12 TSM's must be collected through tenant perception surveys and 10 through landlord data. They cover five themes, including repairs, building safety, effective complaint-handling, respectful and helpful tenant engagement and responsible neighbourhood management.

11.3 Housing have been conducting a review and research of good tenant involvement practice within the sector to prepare for the new requirements of the Social Housing (regulation) Act 2023, Customer Standards, TSM's and future inspections. This was referred to in the BHP 040.

11.4 The Tenant Satisfaction Survey in June 2023 found that younger households continue to be less satisfied than older households for all indicators and confirmed the importance of providing an engagement structure that appeals to younger people to find out why this is and engage them in designing service improvements.

11.5 Based on the findings of this research in February 2023 a draft HECP, developed together with tenants, which set out proposals for new initiatives was presented to Business and Housing Policy Committee.

11.6 These proposals along with the council's approach to engagement have been tested through an independent review by Housing Quality Network (HQN). HQN made recommendations on how the council could improve and advised finding out which of the new initiatives proposed would most appeal to

younger households to enable the council to focus resources on developing those which were most likely to achieve the objective of the HECP plan.

- 11.7 The HQN review and subsequent report evaluated the service and what it aimed to achieve against sector good practice and the expectations of the Regulator of Social Housing. The HQN Presentation of Findings are set out in Appendix 3.
- 11.8 The outcomes of the review were recommendations from HQN on how the council could improve; identifying the following areas to be addressed -
- a) Representativeness across all tenant groups
  - b) Making engagement impactful
  - c) Improving feedback on how tenant views have influenced change.
  - d) Developing good customer insight
- 11.9 At the same time as HQN reported the findings of its review; the results of the Tenant Satisfaction Survey identified that, under 55s and under 35s especially, reported statistically significant lower levels of satisfaction compared to the older households. This highlighted the importance of engaging more widely as being fundamental to successfully shape the service on what's important to all tenants.
- 11.10 The HQN findings; ways to address the identified shortcomings of the current structure and how to meet the needs of the new regulation requirements were discussed in breakout groups at the TACT AGM on 21 September 2023. Feedback received included retaining the Tenants and Council Together identity was important to both tenants and members. One suggestion made by tenants was the idea of an overarching board under the Tenants and Council Together banner. A draft structure was developed on this basis, where the idea of the overarching board was translated into the Tenants and Council Together Board.
- 11.11 HQN recommended testing the new informal initiatives proposed in the draft HECP with all tenants to find out which would most appeal to younger households to enable the council to focus resources on developing those which were most likely to achieve the objective of the plan. In November 2023 the Listening Better survey was conducted to test the various initiatives as advised but also to find out the level of interest in the proposed Board.

## 12 **Listening Better survey results**

- 12.1 The survey was conducted in October-November 2023. 492 respondents returned the survey – a response rate of 11%. A report from the survey is available in Appendix 4.
- 12.2 It should be noted that the survey results were not representative of all tenants and that older age groups are overrepresented. It should also be noted that no statistical tests have been carried out on the results and as such

the survey serves only to give a flavour of the views of tenants and can't be used to determine statistically significant results. The survey provides a helpful interim direction while arrangements can be made to conduct a more robust test through the 2024 Annual Tenant Satisfaction Survey if required.

The headline findings are: -

Preferred methods – tenants from all age groups –

- Email surveys were significantly more popular than other options – 23%.
- Least attractive was being asked for views while waiting outside the school (1% - although may link with age profile of respondents) or supermarket (4%).
- Equally preferred - Community events (10%), WhatsApp survey and formal tenant meetings (9%), paper survey to home (8%).

Under 35s - preferred methods –

- Email
- WhatsApp/Text survey.
- Community events.
- Regular focus groups.

Under 35s - least attractive methods.

- Paper surveys.
- Anniversary calls.
- Talking outside schools and supermarket.
- Formal tenant meeting.
- Task & finish focus groups.

35 – 44 years - preferred methods -

- Email
- WhatsApp/Text survey.

35 – 44 years - least attractive methods.

- Nearly all other options.

Key factors to engaging – all age groups.

- Quick
- Online
- Incentives
- Evidence of making a difference

Key factors to engaging – under 35s.

- Online (27%)
- Quick (24%)

Key factors to engaging – 35 – 44 years.

- Quick (25%)

- Online (21%)
- Incentives (18%)

### 13 **Formal structure proposal**

Appendix 5 is a diagrammatic outline of the structure proposal.

The new structure proposal demonstrates how the supporting engagement process will operate. It should be noted that the structure is not a hierarchy of approvals, all groups are of equal importance with a golden thread running through the structure. Once the structure is approved further work on the proposed draft structure will be co-produced with tenant, leaseholders, and stakeholders.

The structure proposal is in place to hold the council to account, and to identify any service delivery issues and improvement areas. The structure provides for co-production work and provides forums for representative and impactful tenant and leaseholder engagement to ensure that the tenant voice is at the heart of the service.

#### **Tenants and Council Together (TACT) Board**

The purpose of the TACT Board is to hold the council to account and to ensure the voice of tenants' and leaseholders' is heard in the provision and development of Housing Services. The Board will monitor the performance of Housing Service against key performance indicators and be consulted on key issues that affect the service. New Customer Standards Groups (see below) are being introduced with a new council governance structure, in the same way that a registered housing providers' board operates. The board is expected to have at least 8 representatives, membership will include tenants and leaseholders, an independent representation and initially chaired by the Cabinet Member for Housing. More details are set out in the draft Terms of Reference in Appendix 6.

Those tenants who express an interest to take up a position on the board will be chosen through a recruitment process (for recruitment approach see the Terms of Reference for the Board in Appendix 6). This clearly sets out the experience and knowledge required to meet the board membership role. Training and support will be provided for all board members to ensure they can fulfil the requirement of the board positions.

A positive outcome of the Listening Better survey is that one third of all respondents and over 50% of under 35-year-olds were interested in knowing more about the TACT board group. Although most tenants said that being paid for these roles would not make them more likely to apply. However, when this response is considered by age group there is a clear difference in the responses with households younger than 44 years more likely to be interested if there was financial compensation compared to older groups surveyed.

## Consumer Standards Groups

The introduction of Consumer Standards Groups will have an operational focus on the housing service delivery and is designed based on the current tenant/officer Service Delivery Group model. A model that the HQN review supported and found to operate effectively.

The Consumer Standards Groups will be a forum for tenants and officers to regularly meet to bring and discuss detailed operational service changes and policy proposals having engaged with tenants through surveys and various other informal activities (see Appendix 1). The co-production work will provide a forum for representative and impactful tenant engagement and ensure that the tenant voice is at the heart of service continuous improvement opportunities. Bespoke officer advice, support and service data will be provided to each group as required. It is recommended by HQN that the customer standard groups inform discussion and should centre around the Regulator for Social Housing's proposed new Consumer Standards as set out below. This approach will help support and prepare the service in readiness for the Regulator of Social Housing inspection regime.

- **Safety & Quality:** providing safe and good quality homes and landlord services to tenants.
- **Transparency, Influence & Accountability:** being open with tenants and treating them with fairness and respect so that tenants can access services, raise complaints, when necessary, influence decision making and hold their landlord to account.
- **Neighbourhood and Community:** engaging with other relevant parties so that tenants can live in safe and well-maintained neighbourhoods and feel safe in their homes.
- **Tenancy:** sets requirements for the fair allocation and letting of homes and for how those tenancies are managed and ended by landlords.

The Terms of Reference for the Customer Service Groups will be co-produced with the groups themselves.

## Informal activities

The Listening Better survey objective was to inform and understand which of the informal initiatives proposed in the new HECP were most engaging and most attractive to tenants, especially for younger households. This will help to ensure the tenant Involvement programme is representative and impactful for tenants and will help focus resources to those activities most likely to reach groups that are seldom heard.

It is accepted that despite the Listening Better survey being conducted online, the responses still had an older person bias and surveys may not connect

with those for whom the digital format doesn't work. Therefore, one of the priorities of the informal activities of the HECP will be to find an alternative way of connecting with those households – the 'Finding the silence' initiative.

The informal tenant engagement element of the new tenant involvement structure will help provide targeted, representative, and evidenced feedback across bespoke groups. The gathered tenant feedback will inform both the Customer Standards Groups and the TACT Board.

### **Conclusion.**

In conjunction with tenants, the housing service has been reviewing its tenant involvement activities and structure for some time following the recommendations of the Social Housing White Paper and to prepare for the new social housing regulation regime along with meeting the council's Listening Better corporate priority.

The new structure is being developed based on:

- a) Focusing on a model and tenant activities which are more likely to engage the full tenant demographic to include those households seldom heard.
- b) HQN recommendations to expand the current service delivery group model around the 4 consumer standards of the Regulator, improving the balance between formal and informal engagement activities.
- c) Researching effective structures in place at other housing providers
- d) TACT feedback support of the overarching board suggestion.
- e) Listening to what tenants told us about their engagement preferences through the November 2023 Listening Better survey.

Housing will prioritise introduction of the new formal structure in parallel with the new informal initiatives such as WhatsApp/text surveys aimed at improving representativeness along with other areas of work such as improved reporting of the changes made based on what tenants have told us and developing the customer insight function.

The new structure has been developed in partnership with the TACT Committee, the TACT Support Group, Service Delivery Groups, other tenants through survey opportunities, Members, and officers.

The new structure model is due to be introduced in April 2024 and will be regularly reviewed.

## 14 OTHER OPTIONS CONSIDERED AND REJECTED

- 14.1 BHP40 - sets out the details of previous proposal which focused on informal activities and new ways to capturing feedback. Following the HQN review changes to the engagement structure were widened to include the formal

engagement activities and how the representativeness of the structure could be improved.

BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS: -

Previous Committee Reports: -

CAB3429 (H) – Tenant Satisfaction Survey (TSS) Results – 14.11.23

BHP40 – Draft Housing Engagement and Communication Plan – Business and Housing Policy Committee – 28 February 2023

Other Background Documents: -

None

APPENDICES:

Appendix 1 – Housing Engagement and Communication Plan (HECP) - 2024-2026.docx

Appendix 2 – Consultation Details – March 2023 – December 2023

Appendix 3 – HQN - WCC-engagement review presentation – August 2023.pptx

Appendix 4 – Listening Better Report – Nov 2023.

Appendix 5 – Formal Structure Proposal – April 2024

Appendix 6 – TACT Board Draft Terms of Reference

Appendix 7 - HECP Equality Impact Assessment Desktop Refresh – Dec 2023