


Cabinet		
27 November 2024		
Report of: David Joyce, Corporate Director of Housing & Regeneration		Classification: Unrestricted
Approval of the Council's Tenant & Leaseholder Engagement Strategy		
Lead Member	Councillor Kabir Ahmed, Cabinet Member for Regeneration, Inclusive Development & Housebuilding	
Originating Officer(s)	Darren Reynolds, Interim Head of Regulatory Assurance Lesley Owen, Business Development & Improvement Manager, Regulatory Assurance	
Wards affected	All Wards	
Key Decision?	Yes	
Reason for Key Decision	Significant impact on wards	
Forward Plan Notice Published	11 September 2024	
Exempt information	None.	
Strategic Plan Priority / Outcome	Priority 2: Homes for the future Priority 8: A council that listens and works for everyone	

Executive Summary

Under the Regulator of Social Housing's (RSH) Consumer Standards, which came into effect from 1 April 2024, social landlords are required to comply with the Transparency, Influence and Accountability standard. This requires landlords to be open with tenants, treat them fairly, and respect their rights. It allows tenants to access services, raise complaints, influence decision-making, and hold their landlord accountable.

A key element of enabling residents to influence decision making and hold us to account is the menu of engagement opportunities we offer through our Engagement Strategy.

The report sets out the legislative and regulatory requirements of social housing landlords to proactively engage with their tenants and leaseholders. It describes how, working with residents in 2023-24, an engagement strategy was drafted, and consulted on via a variety of methods in Summer 2024.

The majority of respondents to the consultation found the Strategy easy to understand (86%) and agreed that the proposed engagement methods made it more convenient and accessible to have their voices heard and to influence decisions that affect them (78%).

Within the responses, several operational issues were raised. These were concentrated around time taken to answer calls, performance of our repair service and wider concerns around communication and accessibility of our housing management services. These issues have been raised with the relevant service leads and are areas which we are already aware of and are addressing as part of our wider service improvement plan.

Once approved, we will develop an action plan to deliver this strategy. We have already established our tenant committee, '*Tenants Voice*', to hold us to account on performance and shape service design and delivery and we are in the process of planning a series of engagement events to shape our Neighbourhood Action Plans and reconnect our colleagues with our residents and the communities we serve.

Recommendations:

The Mayor in Cabinet is recommended to:

1. Approve the Council's Tenant & Leaseholder Engagement Strategy (*Appendix 1*)
2. To note the Equalities Impact Assessment (*Appendix 3*) and specific equalities considerations as set out in Paragraph 4.1
3. To note the actions within the Regulatory Assurance Action plan (*Appendix 4*) which support the delivery of this Strategy

1 REASONS FOR THE DECISIONS

- 1.1 To comply with the RSH's Standard the council must proactively engage with its tenants and leaseholders. This Engagement Strategy has been developed collaboratively with residents, is set within the current statutory and legislative framework and has received broad support during consultation.
- 1.2 The RSH states that Social Landlords "must give tenants a wide range of meaningful opportunities to influence and scrutinise their landlord's strategies, policies and services", and "working with tenants, must regularly consider ways to improve and tailor their approach to delivering landlord services including tenant engagement. They must implement changes as appropriate to ensure services deliver the intended aims". We believe that the Strategy delivers these requirements.

2 ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS

- 2.1 Having a robust Resident Engagement Strategy, shaped and supported by residents is key to meeting the Transparency, Influence & Accountability Consumer Standard therefore there are not appropriate alternative options.

3 DETAILS OF THE REPORT

3.1 Background

One of the key strategic drivers for insourcing Tower Hamlets Homes (THH) was to provide a focused, more accessible service to residents by aligning housing better with other council services. This Strategy aims to widen participation and resident engagement and to create more direct links between residents and council governance structures, therefore supporting this aim.

- 3.2 This Strategy has been produced collaboratively with our residents. It aims to widen opportunities for involvement and to ensure council tenant and leaseholder voices are heard in shaping the delivery of services, driving improvements and increasing satisfaction with the services that they receive.

3.2 Statutory and Legislative Framework

This strategy has been developed taking account the following:

- [The Charter for Social housing residents: social housing white paper \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](https://publishing.service.gov.uk)
- [Social Housing \(Regulation\) Act 2023 \(legislation.gov.uk\)](https://legislation.gov.uk)
- [Complaint Handling Code | Housing Ombudsman Service \(housing-ombudsman.org.uk\)](https://housing-ombudsman.org.uk)
- [Tenant satisfaction measures: A summary of our requirements – September 2022 \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](https://publishing.service.gov.uk)

- [April 2024 - Transparency Influence and Accountability Standard FINAL 1 .pdf \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](#)

3.3 **National Context**

3.4 The Housing Act (1985) requires local authorities to consult tenants on 'matters of housing management'. This has been strengthened by the Regulator of Social Housing's new 'Transparency, Influence and Accountability' Standard which came into effect in April 2024 arising from the Social Housing (Regulation) Act (2023).

3.5 The Social Housing (Regulation) Act heralds a new era of proactive regulation for the social housing sector, aiming to give tenants greater power and improve access to quick and fair solutions to problems post the Grenfell Tower tragedy. A major focus of the reforms to social housing regulation has been on improving the quality of the landlord-tenant relationship. Landlords need to embed a culture of transparency and accountability that is meaningful to tenants and demonstrates fairness and respect.

3.6 The council must communicate with tenants and provide them with information so that tenants can access housing services, understand what to expect from the council as their landlord, and hold their landlord to account. In turn, landlords must listen to tenants' needs and concerns and take appropriate action to improve how services are delivered.

3.7 At the end of 2023-24 the council submitted its first year's data as required annually by the Regulator's Tenant Satisfaction Measures (TSMs). The TSMs are designed to provide information to tenants on how well its landlord is performing including in comparison with other social housing organisations.

3.8 There are 22 TSMs, including 12 tenant perception measures and 10 management information measures. In addition to overall satisfaction with the council as landlord, the TSMs are grouped around five themes:

- Keeping properties in good repair
- Maintaining building safety
- Respectful and helpful engagement
- Effective handling of complaints
- Responsible neighbourhood management

3.9 **Local context - Strategic priorities and Corporate Engagement Strategy**

The strategy complements and fits into wider council strategies and priorities:

- Community Engagement Strategy 2024-2028
- Customer Experience Strategy 2023-2026

- Strategic Plan 2022-2026
- A Tower Hamlets for All

3.10 **Developing new methods of engagement with council tenant and leaseholders**

During summer 2023, workshops were held with tenants and leaseholders alongside housing management and other council staff to ascertain what meaningful engagement looked like for them.

Tenants and leaseholders were consulted around the following areas:

- *In its communication, the council should aim to be...*

Council tenants and leaseholders want better (clearer) and speedier responses to queries and more direct engagement with staff. They also wanted to see communication via a range of methods: online, in person and via block posters.

- *When we raise issues, the council should aim to be...*

Quicker to respond especially on repairs, keep to timescales and keep residents informed of progress. Tenants and leaseholders also want more accuracy and accountability for leaseholder bills.

- *When making key decisions, the council should aim to be...*

More informative and communicate better especially confirming that responses have been received and train staff better (on communicating with residents).

- *To build trust with residents, the council should aim to be...*

More responsive and feedback better on outcomes (more you said... we did), treat residents with respect and be more visible on estates.

- *When interacting with the council, we the residents, should aim to be...*

Polite, respectful and fair.

These principles informed the development of the draft strategy.

3.11 **Tenants' Voice**

A new governance structure called *Tenants' Voice* was set up in the Spring of 2024 to provide strategic engagement with council tenants and leaseholders on the quality and accessibility of housing management services. The *Tenants' Voice* (whose membership consists of eight tenants, three leaseholders and one sub-tenant of a leaseholder) has been consulted (as have all council tenants and leaseholders) on the development of this strategy including the vision, priorities and mechanisms of resident engagement.

3.12 Consultation Methodology

The draft Tenant and Leaseholder Engagement Strategy is attached as *Appendix 1*. Consultation on the draft strategy ran from 5 July to 19 August 2024. We lengthened the consultation period to maximise response rates, allowing for School holidays and the inclusion of our Summer Fun Day events held across the borough.

As well as an on-line survey on the Tower Hamlets *Let's Talk* portal, which was available in Bengali and Somali as well as English, the Strategy and questions were:

- Discussed at the Tenants' Voice meeting of 31 July
- Sent to targeted groups such as TRAs and the 1,400 residents who had indicated during the THH insourcing consultation an interest in being engaged
- Included in the Our EastEnd resident newsletter
- Posted on social media
- In addition, copies of the survey were completed by residents at four Community Fun Days at different locations in the borough over the summer.

3.13 Consultation responses

We received a total of 215 responses to the consultation. The demographic profile of the respondents is set out in more detail in *Appendix 2* but in summary included:

- 156 tenants, 55 leaseholders and 3 residents of other tenures
- 54 male, 128 female respondents
- 33 disabled respondents
- 145 of Muslim faith, 17 Christians
- Respondents from all borough post codes

Was the purpose of the Strategy easy to understand?

86% of respondents felt the draft Strategy was easy to understand showing support for how the strategy was written and presented. Where residents were not in support, they felt that the strategy lacked specific objectives (SMART) and some felt that the strategy provided too much detail.

In response, we will ensure our Action Plan has SMART objectives with clear KPIs so residents can hold us to account in terms of the effectiveness of our Resident Engagement activity.

Will the proposed methods make it more convenient and accessible to have your voices heard and influence decisions?

78% of respondents agreed, showing support for the strategy. Where residents did not agree, their responses were concerned with the operational performance of the service (Repairs, Call Wait times).

In response, we have factored in this feedback to our overall service improvement plan. An end-to-end review of the Repairs Service is already underway with an expected delivery date of December 2024.

Anything missing from the Strategy?

30% of respondents made comments or gave suggestions to improve the Strategy. These included:

- **General issues of communication:** with too much resident communication online; the need for language assistance; the need for a named housing officer; not knowing who to contact to respond to their issue; lack of response to emails; LBTH not listening to residents
- **Service issues including:** call wait times; standard of repairs and lack of post-inspection; functionality of My Home; standard of cleanliness; cost of service charges & major works bills
- **Process:** lack of accountability or SMART targets; how can residents challenge; how can residents get involved
- **Engagement:** LBTH to hold more community activities/events especially for children
- **Stakeholders:** How the Strategy applies to s20 consultation, TRAs and TMOs

3.14 Response to the consultation feedback

Many of the comments made by respondents relate to their experience of and feelings about the housing service rather than suggestions to improve the draft Strategy *per se*. These have been fed back to colleagues to inform reviews and improvement projects and activities.

Improving communication with residents is a key element of the Strategy. The role of TRAs is already set out in the draft Strategy. More community events and activities are planned to be co-ordinated by the Community Partnerships Team.

The Strategy is intended to set the overall general direction on resident engagement for the housing management service rather than specific measurable outcomes. The *Tenants' Voice* panel is soon to select the suite of measures it will be using at its bi-monthly meetings to scrutinise housing management performance.

Based on resident feedback we will ensure the following areas are included in the final strategy

- Signposting on how to get involved in different layers of engagement
- The role of Tenant Management Organisations (TMOs)
- References to statutory consultation including S20 consultation with leaseholders in advance of major works

190 of the 215 respondents expressed a wish to be kept in touch with following the consultation. Their details have been added to those who have already indicated a desire to be involved in shaping housing management services.

4. EQUALITIES IMPLICATIONS

4.1 The Equality Impact Assessment [EIA] found the Strategy overall to be positive in that it offers a wide range of engagement opportunities to council tenants and leaseholders. The EIA also identified a number of potential barriers to participation affecting residents differently depending on their protected characteristics. These included:

- Older people in Tower Hamlets are more likely to have mobility, digital literacy and language issues
- Residents with a physical disability are more likely to have issues with accessing buildings/events; the visually impaired may struggle with reading engagement materials; those with mental health issues may find attending in-person events difficult
- Women in Tower Hamlets more likely than men to have language issues
- Residents of a BAME background are more likely to have language issues
- Residents with a religious belief may be excluded from engagement at certain days/times
- Residents with children or other caring responsibilities are likely to have challenges to participation

4.3 It is in the *delivery* of the Strategy where the council must ensure these potential barriers to participation are mitigated. Examples of such mitigation include:

- Translated, easy-read and large print version of written materials
- Offering hybrid and face-to-face options for activities
- Offering range of dates/times for events
- Ensuring venues used are accessible
- Covering transport and childcare costs for strategic resident panel members
- Avoiding key religious events for engagement activities

Full details of the EIA are set out in **Appendix 3**.

5. OTHER STATUTORY IMPLICATIONS

5.1 This section of the report is used to highlight further specific statutory implications that are either not covered in the main body of the report or are required to be highlighted to ensure decision makers give them proper consideration. Examples of other implications may be:

- Best Value Implications,
- Consultations,
- Environmental (including air quality),
- Risk Management,
- Crime Reduction,
- Safeguarding.
- Data Protection / Privacy Impact Assessment.

5.2 No other statutory implications have been identified.

6 COMMENTS OF THE CHIEF FINANCE OFFICER

6.1 There are no financial implications emanating from this report which seeks approval of the Council's tenant and leaseholder engagement strategy. All costs associated with consultation and development of the strategy have been contained within existing HRA budget provisions.

7 COMMENTS OF LEGAL SERVICES

7.1 The Social Housing (Regulation) Act 2023 made changes to how social housing is managed, bringing in increased regulation of social landlords and providing for the Regulator for Social Housing to set consumer and economic standards for social housing providers, hold providers to account and take action if these standards are breached. The Transparency, Influence and Accountability' Standard came into effect in April 2024.

7.2 The Regulator of Social Housing has enforcement powers which it can use if a registered provider does not meet the required consumer or economic standards. This can include serving enforcement notices on a provider and issuing fines if the provider fails to comply with the enforcement notice.

Linked Reports, Appendices and Background Documents

Linked Report

- NONE

Appendices

- Appendix 1: Draft Council Tenant & Leaseholder Engagement Strategy 2024-2029
- Appendix 2: Consultation responses
- Appendix 3: Equality Impact Assessment
- Appendix 4: Regulatory Assurance Action Plan

Background Documents – Local Authorities (Executive Arrangements)(Access to Information)(England) Regulations 2012

- None.

Officer contact details for documents:

N/A