

# Tenant Engagement Strategy

## Hearing our Tenants' Voice

Housing Service 2024-2030

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## Foreword

### **Councillor Rebecca Shoob, Cabinet Member for Housing and Homelessness**



Nobody knows more about homes and neighbourhoods than the people who live in them. That's why it is essential that all our tenants and leaseholders across the district have the opportunity to share their insight when it comes to running our housing service.

We are very lucky to live in a beautiful district that ranges from rural to urban, from coast to hills to marsh. Just as we have a diverse geographic area, there are different ways that suit different people to get in touch. We want to make sure that everyone who wants to can share their knowledge and experience in a way that works for them.

By working in partnership with tenants, together we can create a great housing service and make a positive difference for you, your neighbourhood and the wider community.

### **Elaine Cox, Chairperson of the Strategic Tenants Advisory Panel**



I have been an engaged tenant for a long time now, and in 2020 my greatest hope was to make sure tenant engagement was relevant and available for all the tenants in the Folkestone and Hythe District, and that we could continue to collaborate on issues that matter the most and have our voices heard.

Although we all had a difficult start with the pandemic affecting meetings and events, we managed to collaborate effectively to build plans for the new level of tenant engagement that was needed to fulfil the expectations of the Regulator of Social Housing and the Government.

F&HDC officers and I designed and recruited for the Strategic Tenants Advisory Panel (STAP) and, together with the incredible group of talented and skilled panel members, we have achieved so much in just over 2 years, including 12 consultations, 5 strategies, 6 policies/procedures and 5 contracts. In addition to that we continue to work with the Performance Specialist and all the key officers at the council, including the leadership team and councillors, and have also been part of the pilot scheme for the Regulator of Social Housing's new inspection framework.

We are entrusted with a strategic level agenda and have built some strong relationships across the housing service and beyond, but also we have stayed true to our hearts by continuing to challenge and hold the council to account where needed, and see the results of our challenges being followed up and acted upon.

I am happy that we are treated with respect, transparency and credibility. With the new scrutiny panel established, we will also be able to deep dive into individual issues such as anti-social behaviour and complaints to improve processes and more. STAP are always available for tenants' and leaseholders' feedback and suggestions.

### **Andy Blaszkowicz, Director – Housing & Operations**



This strategy sets out Folkestone & Hythe District Council's continued commitment to engage with our tenants and leaseholders (collectively referred to as tenants in this document), involving them in the decisions which affect their homes, local communities and the delivery of the housing service.

Understanding the changing needs and aspirations of our tenants is vital if we are to deliver a truly great housing service.

The council has developed this strategy jointly with tenants to ensure that the variety of opportunities created for genuine engagement include things that interest them, are accessible to all, and take into account different lifestyles and availability to participate. We look forward to working with our tenants and encourage everyone to get involved.

## Gill Butler, Chief Officer – Housing



A great deal has happened over the past few years across Folkestone & Hythe District Council (F&HDC), and within the council's housing service, and I am pleased to say that much of this work has been developed in co-production with our tenants and leaseholders.

Tenants wanted F&HDC to improve digital ways to engage and communicate and so in 2023 we launched Housing Online, which is a self-service, sign-in tool where tenants can access their account themselves whenever they want to, doing everything from raising a repair or making a rent payment online. We will continue to listen to our residents, and use this valuable feedback to continuously improve, not only the service itself, but also our responsiveness and customer service skills.

## Introduction

### About the Housing Service

Folkestone and Hythe District Council (the council) provides nearly 3,400 homes in the district. Most are social rented or affordable homes, just over 200 are leasehold properties, and we have a small number of shared ownership properties, or part rent/part buy homes.

In October 2020 when these homes came back in-house, a new housing management service was established to provide tenants and council-managed homeowners with an engaged, responsive and transparent housing service.

### Vision

The vision for the housing service is: **'To create a truly excellent service, one that is digitally enabled, easy to do business with and where tenants (customers) are at the heart of everything we do'**. This includes providing a range of inclusive and accessible engagement options at every level. We want to use people's individual and collective skills to shape and build the service and future of affordable housing in the Folkestone and Hythe district.

The previous Tenant Engagement Strategy was developed in 2021 to set out how the council wanted to work in partnership with tenants to ensure they had the opportunity to engage with the housing service in whatever way suited them.

This updated version explains how we want to involve tenants in helping us fulfil the current and future expectations of the council, its tenants, the Regulator of Social Housing and central government.

## **Strategic Priorities for the Council**

This strategy and the tenant-centred aims of the housing service are directly linked to the ambitions outlined in the Council's Corporate Plan for 2021-2030, '**Creating Tomorrow Together**'.

The plan has four service ambitions:

**A Vibrant Economy:** Focus on attracting investment into the area, adapting to changes in the economies of local business and high streets in the area to increase employment, aspirations and the success of local businesses.

**Quality Homes and Infrastructure:** Ensure better access to a wider choice of high-quality homes for all residents in the district, embracing sustainability.

**Positive Community Leadership:** To support and contribute to the health and wellbeing of residents. Addressing inequalities of access to resources and welfare services between communities, such as education, transport, and health provision.

**A Thriving Environment:** Providing and maintaining open spaces and investment in green infrastructure to enhance our natural environment. Part of this is the aim that council services will generate net zero carbon emissions by 2030.

The work undertaken to achieve these ambitions is driven by six key principles, which include continuous improvement, and a commitment to be transparent, stable and accountable. The work we do alongside tenants in scrutinising the delivery of the housing service is part of 'Creating Tomorrow Together'.

## Regulatory Requirements

### Regulator of Social Housing Standards

There are four consumer regulatory requirements that housing providers must adhere to. For the purposes of tenant engagement, the council must follow the requirements of the Regulator of Social Housing's '**Transparency, Influence and Accountability Standard**', which replaces the previous 'Tenant Involvement and Empowerment Standard' in April 2024. The following are the six required outcomes for all social housing providers:

- **Fairness and respect:** treat all tenants with fairness and respect
- **Diverse needs:** take action to deliver fair access to, and equitable outcomes of, housing and landlord services for all tenants
- **Engagement with tenants:** take tenants' views into account in decision making about how landlord services are delivered
- **Information about landlord services:** communicate with tenants and provide information so tenants can use landlord services, understand what to expect from their landlord, and hold their landlord to account
- **Performance information:** collect and provide information to support effective scrutiny by tenants of their landlord's performance in delivering landlord services
- **Complaints:** ensure complaints are addressed fairly, effectively, and promptly

The standard underpins the principles of co-regulation and tenant engagement. This ensures that elected councillors and council officers are responsible for ensuring that housing services are managed effectively. The council must demonstrate that we support tenants to shape and scrutinise service delivery and to hold us to account where standards are not being met.

### Tenant Satisfaction Measures Standard

This came into effect from April 2023 and requires social landlords to collect, and publish, performance against 22 Tenant Satisfaction Measures (TSMs).

The data for 10 of these comes from in-house data, and landlords must carry out an annual tenant satisfaction survey to collect data for the other 12 TSMs. The TSMs cover five themes:

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

### **Social Housing (Regulation) Act 2023**

This Act was introduced in July 2023 following the publication of the government's "Charter for Social Housing Tenants" white paper in 2020. It introduces measures to give tenants a greater voice, ensure things are remedied more quickly for tenants, have more opportunity to hold their landlord to account, and gives the Regulator of Social Housing more powers to intervene when things go wrong.

The Act introduced these changes:

- The Regulator of Social Housing is now able to carry out regular inspections of social housing providers, and can issue unlimited fines to landlords where they have breached the standards
- The Housing Ombudsman, who oversees housing complaints, has new powers to publish best practice guidance to landlords and review cases
- Social housing landlords are subject to strict time limits to address health and safety hazards such as reports of damp and mould
- Social housing managers are required to hold appropriate qualifications

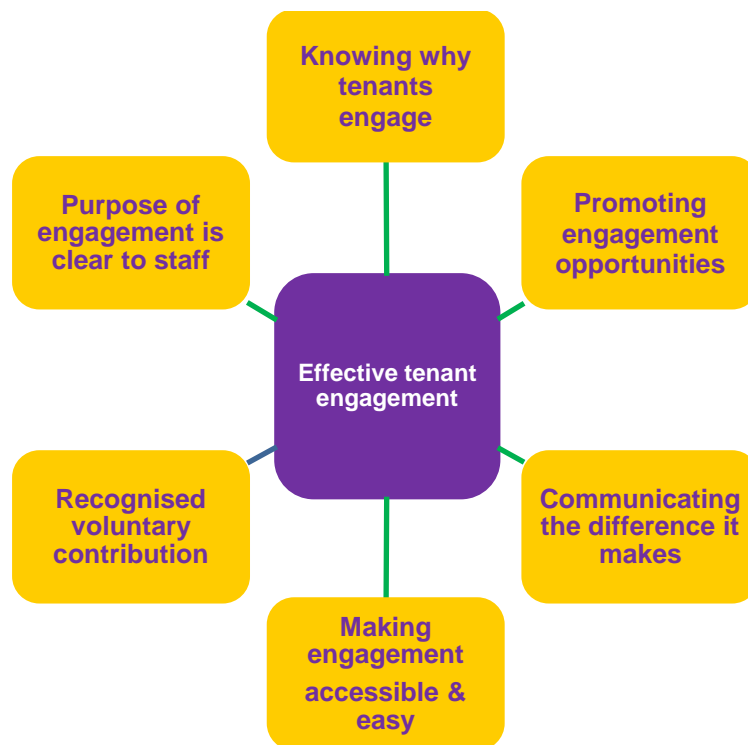
## **About Tenant Engagement**

### **What is Tenant Engagement?**

Tenant engagement is a term used to cover many different tasks and activities through which tenants can contribute to, or oversee how, the housing service is delivered. As part of its vision the council will ensure that tenants are provided with a range of flexible options for involvement and engagement at different levels, which include both formal and informal settings in person and online.



## Key Elements of Effective Engagement:



The council has created various ways for tenants to participate in engagement activities safely and at a time and in a way that suits them; we are supporting tenants to learn and explore new ways of working and communicating with us to ensure engagement thrives and delivers improved services for the benefit of all tenants.

### **Impact & Outcomes of Meaningful Engagement**

Effective engagement reaches all tenants, not just those already involved, ensuring everyone has opportunities to contribute should they wish to do so. It is not only about what tenants can tell us about their housing experience and needs, but also about giving tenants an understanding of what a housing provider must consider when delivering the service. This honest, open exchange of information promotes meaningful engagement, realistic expectations, as well as better decision making, which improves outcomes and value for money.



The knock-on effect increases tenant and staff satisfaction, of pride in a person’s home, neighbourhood and workplace, leading to a sense of place within the community.

Good engagement is built on mutual respect and the council has an enormous appreciation for the dedication shown by the Strategic Tenants Advisory Panel and Independent Living Forum, and for the experience and knowledge of its members. The aim is to expand engagement to increase the positive impact and service outcomes.

### **Tenant Engagement Structure**

We have developed a structure which allows tenants to participate as much or as little as they want. This is being done with different streams and levels of tasks and activities.

**The Strategic Tenants Advisory Panel (STAP)** is a small group of representative tenants who will work with the council at a strategic level. Their brief includes monitoring performance against the expectations of the Regulator of Social Housing’s Consumer Standards, specifically the Transparency, Influence and Accountability Standard. They hold us to account by regularly scrutinising our performance information.

Working alongside the senior managers and councillors, the group will help deliver year upon year of improved service delivery. STAP makes recommendations to the Chief Officer for Housing and Director of Housing & Operations and share the views of tenants in their neighbourhoods, which have been fed back through evidence from the 'Your Choice' and 'Business / Customer Insight' channels (see below).

It is recognised that for tenants to be able to perform this strategic role, they require ongoing support, training and appropriate resources, which is provided by the council.

**Your Choice** draws on the pool of tenants and leaseholders who have expressed an interest in active engagement. It includes smaller groups of tenants who come together, either in person or online, to:

- Examine a particular service area in detail and make recommendations for changes (Tenant Scrutiny Panel)
- Examine and comment on services specifically provided to tenants in our independent living schemes (Independent Living Forum)
- Examine and comment on proposals for changes to key policies
- Be involved in local matters, such as major works on an estate
- Be part of particular interest groups, such as taking part in the annual Garden Competition
- Take part in local area walkabouts/inspections.
- Be Estate Champions
- Be mystery shoppers

**Your Choice Plus** involves seeking the views of as many tenants as possible, either on matters that affect all tenants or more locally based issues, in ways that are accessible, convenient and do not require ongoing commitment. This includes, for example:

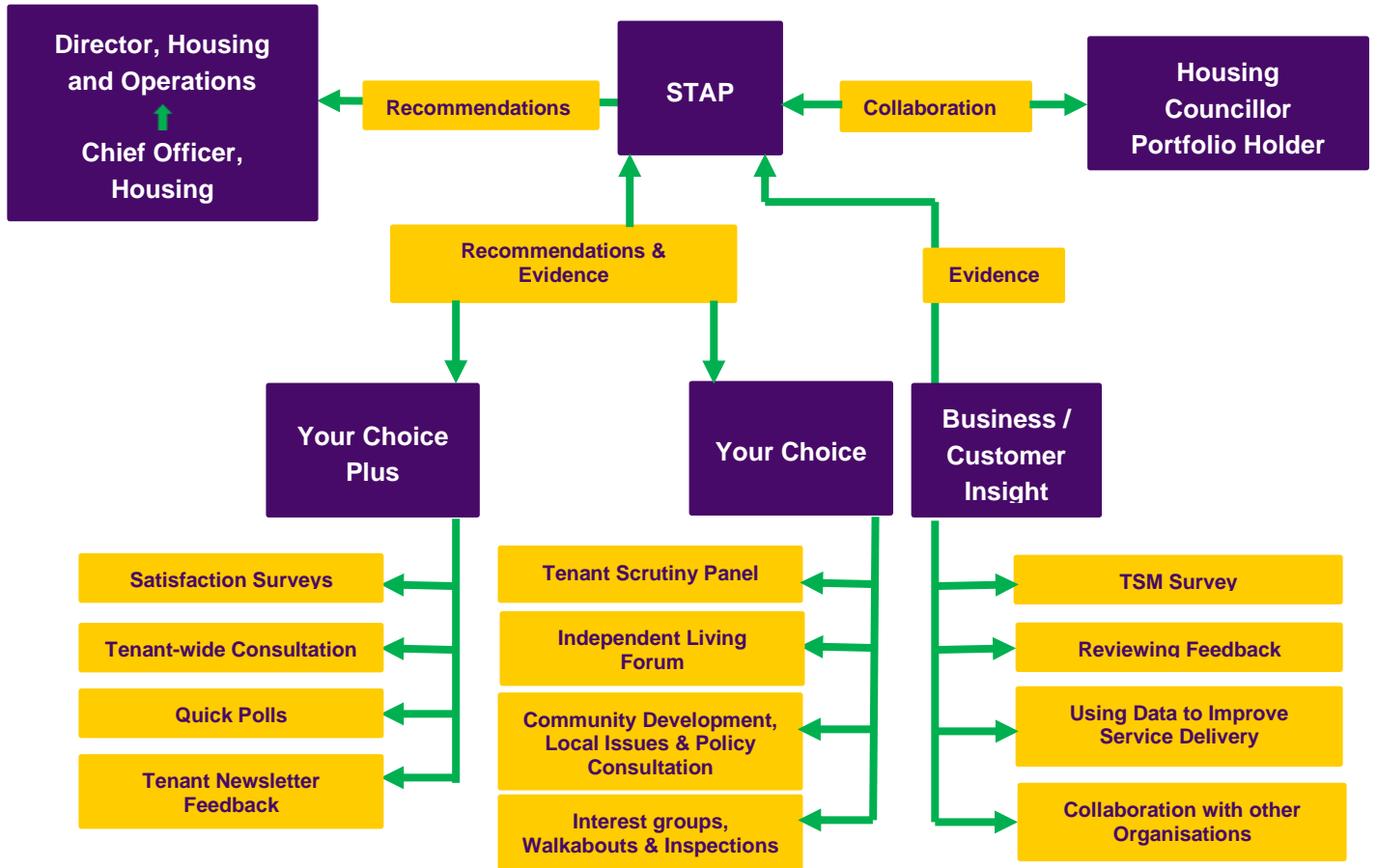
- Promoting and completing satisfaction surveys
- Local or tenant-wide online or postal consultations
- Quick polls using social, and other, media
- Seeking responses to articles in the tenant newsletter

**Business or Customer Insight** is about making good use of all the data and information that we possess or receive from tenants about services and satisfaction. It also includes learning from best practice in other organisations. Some examples include:

- Tenant Satisfaction Survey – Since April 2023, it is now a legal requirement under the expectations set out by the Regulator for Social Housing’s Tenant Satisfaction Measures standard for landlords to carry out an annual tenant perception survey
- Reviewing feedback received, including complaints and compliments, social media comments and contractor satisfaction surveys
- Working to improve our customer profile data
- Working to make best use of transactional data – the reasons our tenants contact us, such as to report a repair or a neighbourhood problem, which combined with profile data can help us to understand the important issues that affect different groups of tenants
- Exploring collaborative working with other landlords and organisations
- Aiming to introduce real-time data so we can quickly identify and respond to issues or concerns promptly
- There are various neighbourhood level tenant engagement groups and opportunities across the ‘Your Choice Plus’ part of the Tenant Engagement structure. There are direct groups of tenants and leaseholders that feedback and take part in surveys via email and text. In February 2022 there was an online consultation by email asking for views about ending fixed term tenancies, that generated a good response, which supported our proposal for the cessation of this type of tenancy
- There is a tenants’ only private Facebook group that has a programme of three-times weekly updates and posts, and STAP are also given the opportunity to post to tenants directly, to share key messages independently of the council
- There is also the suggestions and feedback portal on the website as well as the dedicated tenant involvement email address that all gets channelled directly to the Tenant Liaison Officer to pick up and action
- Tied in with work to link the tenants’ section of the F&HDC website to the ‘MyAccount’ service, the Housing Service has ambitions to collect more data from our tenants and then use the insights gained to help shape the service

- [Housing Online](#), which is the tenant access portal, was launched in January 2023. This provides tenants with quick and easy access at their convenience using a smartphone, PC or tablet, 24/7. The new service frees up staff resources to support those who may benefit from additional assistance. Information that can be accessed directly by tenants includes:
  - Viewing and updating contact and personal details
  - Viewing rent balances and statements
  - Making online payments
  - Setting up a Direct Debit
  - Requesting a repair
  - Chasing the progress of a repair
  - Viewing repair history
  - Responding to surveys
  - Uploading documents
  - Making payments

**Tenant Engagement Structure diagram:**



## **Supporting a Tenant Engagement Culture**

Tenant Engagement comes from and promotes a culture of mutual trust, respect and partnership between tenants and the landlord. It exists when these interests work together towards a common goal of continuously improving housing conditions and housing services. Tenant engagement will not be the responsibility of one or two members of staff, but will be an expectation of all members of the housing team.

The key principles of a tenant engagement culture are that:

- Tenant engagement should be a continuous process where participants share information and ideas, working towards a common understanding of problems and agreeing solutions
- All participants need to have all the information available to consider issues properly, this needs to be clear, timely and accessible
- All participants need to have all the information available to consider issues properly. Information needs to be clear, timely and accessible
- Decision-making processes should be open, clear and accountable
- Tenants should have enough time to consider matters properly. They should have the opportunity to work out a common view
- The landlord must recognise the independence of the tenants' voice
- Good working relations evolve gradually so must be flexible to adapt to local circumstances
- Tenants need adequate resources for training and access to support in order to be organised and methodical when required
- All consultations, surveys and feedback requests are designed so that the majority of tenants are able to participate, should they wish to do so, and they are given a generous amount of time to respond.
- STAP have their agenda and any resources and presentations a full week before the meeting and if it is a long or complex document, such as a policy it is sent as early as possible so that they can confer and provide any feedback in between meetings.

- All tenant engagement groups meetings are minuted and the minutes and actions from each previous meeting are checked and agreed independently by the tenants so that they are able to see the process and actions taken from their requests and feedback. Tenant Liaison Officer/s will be on hand to respond or attend events and meetings out of hours where needed.
- Members of the engaged tenants' groups have been provided with hardware where needed such as laptops and/or tablets, sessions have been provided to assist tenants in using online meeting platforms.
- All questions received via social media or other sources are noted and responded to. Tenant involvement and impact assessment data is expected in formal reports that are produced by the housing service.

## **Barriers to Engagement**

It is important to identify the barriers that hinder tenant engagement and how these can be overcome. We recognise there are many barriers which prevent meaningful engagement, including:

- Lack of skills, training and/or confidence needed
- Understanding published information
- Time, work, family, caring constraints
- Transport, travel and other expenses

The Council is therefore committed to offering solutions and opportunities so that tenant engagement is as easy to access as possible for tenants. These solutions include, but are not limited to:

- Providing training and support for tenants who would like to engage in any way
- Providing information in a range of formats to ensure it can be understood by all
- Providing information in a timely way, allowing tenants a reasonable and appropriate period to understand the information before commenting or giving feedback
- Providing transport and covering the financial costs incurred by tenants and leaseholders in carrying out their engagement roles

- Offering a wide range of engagement methods to suit all lifestyles, and in challenging situations to allow tenants to continue to engage safely
- Arranging meetings at times and locations, or online, which are accessible and safe for tenants
- Providing practical support to establish engagement groups
- Training has been provided to the STAP team, ranging from skills based, including IT and board member skills to technical housing knowledge training.
- Full sessions have been provided to cover published information such as new government legislation, and policies and procedures that we are asking for feedback on
- We have a flexible approach to all tenant engagement, with a variety of ways to join in - online meetings, via email, telephone and letter, meetings can be facilitated at weekends or in the evenings if required. All costs are covered for transport and refreshments and other reasonable out of pocket expenses may be covered.
- All meetings are facilitated and supported by council officers.

### **Valuing Diversity**

At the heart of this the housing service is our commitment to providing a fair and equitable service and ensuring that tenants are treated without discrimination. This strategy helps to deliver this commitment. We will make sure that in delivering our services we continue to be inclusive and representative. We want all our tenants to have the opportunity to be involved, regardless of protected characteristics or any other factors including: age, disability, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, marital status or civil partnership, pregnancy or maternity status. We are committed to continuing to promote a digital agenda but we will also provide information in other formats when required.



## **Training for Staff and for tenants about Tenant**

### **Engagement**

For this strategy to be successful it will be important that key staff and tenants have the right skills and approach. This will require an ongoing learning programme to help develop the right culture within the housing service, and to equip tenants with the necessary understanding of the service.

Tenant engagement has been embedded into the culture of the housing service. Routine training was developed and rolled out to all members of the housing team during 2022 and guidance and support is ongoing.

### **Communication**

High quality communication is key to keeping tenants informed, and to developing a mutually beneficial landlord/tenant relationship that encourages feedback and engagement. Quality can be measured in terms of the style, frequency and content of communications. As part of this strategy the council will:

- Publish a tenant handbook and keep this updated
- Publish a tenant newsletter at least twice each year, and work with tenants on its content and style
- Publish "your voice, our action" bulletins twice each year, to update tenants on what the council has done as a result of tenant feedback
- Produce key performance information
- Ensure all consultation documents and correspondence are produced in a clear and accessible style
- Maintain an accessible and up to date housing section of the council's website
- Maintain a regular and up to date presence on social media
- The council's Communications team includes an Officer that devotes specific time to working on housing communications
- Relevant updates are shared several times a week on the main social media pages and the website and events, updates and timely news is sent out with rent statements or via email and text
- Promoting relevant updates and surveys through the Housing Online portal

## **Tenants' Key Priorities**

Based on feedback received from the tenant satisfaction survey conducted in 2023, key service delivery priorities for tenants are:

- o Repairs and maintenance – delivery of a good service
- o Feeling listened to – dealing effectively with complaints
- o Dealing with anti-social behaviour effectively

Listening to tenants' views, this strategy focuses on engaging with tenants in relation to these key areas, alongside other concerns and priorities.

## **Monitoring Our Performance**

It is important that tenants hold us to account, that we do what we say we will do, and our performance against the commitments set out in this strategy are visible to tenants, councillors and other key stakeholders. To do this we will:

- Produce a Tenant Engagement Action Plan which will show how this strategy is being delivered and how we are acting upon tenant feedback every year
- Develop a set of key performance indicators to monitor key aspects of the strategy
- Produce regular briefings on tenant engagement activities
- Update all tenants via the tenant newsletter on the work and achievements in tenant engagement

This strategy sets out our aims, ambitions and commitments for developing tenant engagement for the coming years. We acknowledge that there is always room for improvement and so we will ensure that we review this strategy each year and provide updates to tenants, councillors and other stakeholders.