

CABINET
4 MAY 2021

CUSTOMER ENGAGEMENT STRATEGY 2021-2024

**Responsible Cabinet Member - Councillor Kevin Nicholson,
Health and Housing Portfolio**

**Responsible Director – Ian Williams, Director of Economic Growth and
Neighbourhood Services**

SUMMARY REPORT

Purpose of the Report

1. To seek approval for the Customer Engagement Strategy for 2021-24.

Summary

2. Darlington Borough Council Housing Services has a long and successful track record of engaging with and involving tenants in the delivery of housing services.
3. One of the key strands of the new Social Housing Regulator's Consumer Standards covers 'Tenant Involvement and Empowerment'. These state that we must consult our tenants at least once every three years on the best way of involving them in the governance and scrutiny of our housing service.
4. The Customer Engagement Strategy for 2021-24 (**Appendix 1**) sets out the process for how we will involve and empower our tenants, including how our engagement activities will be monitored and reported.
5. These matters were considered by Health and Housing Scrutiny Committee on 14 April 2020 and no amendments were recommended to the proposals.

Recommendation

6. It is recommended that Cabinet:-
 - (a) Consider the contents of the report, and
 - (b) Approve the Customer Engagement Strategy for 2021-24.

Reasons

7. The recommendations are supported by the following reasons:-
 - (a) The Social Housing Regulator's Consumer Standards places a duty on social housing providers to involve and empower our tenants in the delivery of housing services.

- (b) The adoption of a formal Customer Engagement Strategy is the best way to demonstrate how we will achieve this and allows formal reporting and monitoring of engagement activities through the Health and Housing Scrutiny Committee.

Ian Williams
Director of Economic Growth and Neighbourhood Services

Background Papers

- (i) The Charter for Social Housing Residents: Social Housing White Paper
- (ii) Tenant Involvement and Empowerment Standard: Regulator of Social Housing

Anthony Sandys: Extension 6926

S17 Crime and Disorder	There are no issues
Health and Well Being	There is no impact in this report
Carbon Impact and Climate Change	There is no impact in this report
Diversity	The Customer Engagement Strategy ensures that all tenant involvement and empowerment activities will take into account the diverse needs of Council tenants
Wards Affected	All wards with Council housing
Groups Affected	Council tenants and leaseholders
Budget and Policy Framework	There are no implications
Key Decision	This is a key decision
Urgent Decision	This is not an urgent decision
One Darlington: Perfectly Placed	This report supports the 'Building Strong Communities' theme of the Sustainable Community Strategy.
Efficiency	There are no implications
Impact on Looked After Children and Care Leavers	There are no implications

MAIN REPORT

Information and Analysis

8. One of the key strands of the Government's Social Housing White Paper: 'The Charter for Social Housing Residents' is 'To have your voice heard by your landlord'. Specifically, social landlords are expected to:
 - (a) Seek out best practice and consider how they can continually improve the way they engage with their tenants.
 - (b) Support more effective engagement with tenants by giving them the tools to influence their landlords and hold them to account.
 - (c) Review professional training and development to ensure tenants receive a high standard of customer service.
9. Social Housing is controlled by the Regulator of Social Housing and they have set out specific expectations and outcomes that providers of social housing are expected to achieve. The main area of regulation covering Local Authorities is the Consumer Standard.
10. One of the four Consumer Standards set by the Regulator is the **Tenant Involvement and Empowerment Standard**, which social housing providers must comply with. For Local Authorities, Members who govern service delivery, are responsible for ensuring the Council meets the relevant standards and determining how this is done.
11. The Customer Engagement Strategy 2021-24 sets out how the Council will meet the standards, including what specific activities will be undertaken, the expected outcomes that will be achieved and how these will be monitored and reported.
12. The Council's Housing Services has a long and successful track record of engagement with our tenants and consulting with them on every aspect of service delivery through:
 - (a) The Tenants Scrutiny Panel
 - (b) The Readers Panel
 - (c) Housing Connect magazines and the Annual Report
 - (d) The Housing pages of the Council website and the Housing Facebook page
 - (e) Customer satisfaction surveys
 - (f) Mystery shopping exercises
 - (g) Customer complaints
 - (h) Estate walkabouts
13. The Customer Engagement Strategy focusses on four specific themes:
 - (a) **Providing the right information.** This is about how we will provide our tenants with the right information about our services that meets their diverse needs, how we will encourage tenants to use our digital services and what support we will provide to ensure that no-one is excluded.
 - (b) **Listening to our tenants.** This is about how we will consult our tenants on all aspects of service delivery; how the outcome of consultation will be reported and how we will ensure tenants can make their voice heard.

- (c) **Making decisions with our tenants.** This is about how we will involve our tenants in decision making processes and how we will use the outcome of consultation to make decisions and shape the services tenants receive.
 - (d) **Maximising scrutiny and accountability.** This is about how we will build trust and transparency and ensure our tenants can hold us to account, how we will support our tenants to build their capacity and empower them to be more effectively involved, and how we will use complaints about our services to understand what has gone wrong and what we need to do to put things right.
14. Specific actions within the strategy will be supported by an annual Engagement Plan, setting out the detailed activities we will undertake to consult with and involve our tenants.
 15. Where possible, we will promote opportunities for engagement through digital channels, whilst always providing more traditional methods of engagement through surveys, telephone contact and face to face meetings. For those tenants who are digitally excluded from our services, we will provide the right level of support to ensure that everyone can become involved.
 16. The Customer Engagement Strategy has already been considered by the Tenant's Board and the Health and Housing Scrutiny Committee and covers the three year period from 2021 to 2024. The Tenant Involvement and Empowerment Standard states that social housing providers must consult tenants at least once every three years on the best way of involving tenants in the governance and scrutiny of the organisation's housing management service.
 17. Regular updates on the progress against the strategy will be provided to the Tenants Board and on an annual basis reported to the Health and Housing Scrutiny Committee.