

NORTH STAR HOUSING GROUP TENANT INVOLVEMENT STRATEGY

INTRODUCTION

This strategy sets out how we will place tenants at the heart of our services and sits alongside our Community Engagement Strategy. This strategy applies to North Star Housing Group, Endeavour Housing Association and Teesdale Housing Association.

Our tenants are all individuals with different needs and aspirations. They will want to participate in different ways and to different degrees. We need to make sure that they have the opportunity to participate at a level that is both comfortable and convenient for them. Delivering this and constantly seeking to improve our approach to involvement will lead to empowered tenants, meaningful involvement, improved services, better and increased choice for tenants and higher levels of tenant satisfaction.

Involvement and empowerment are not the same thing. Tenant involvement is a technique by which tenant empowerment is enabled. Effective involvement must take into account equality and diversity issues and avoid discriminatory processes to ensure all tenants have an opportunity to contribute and to be heard. Empowerment requires providing Tenants with the skills, knowledge, access to funding and training in order for them to be able to act independently and to be heard. This approach equips people with the skills to be able to hold providers to account, influence service delivery and the decisions that we take. Tenant empowerment needs to be both individual and collective and requires a proactive approach.

AIMS

We aim to:

- Deliver a range of involvement opportunities through a wide range of approaches
- Ensure representative involvement
- Pilot new approaches that maximise and develop the opportunities for Tenants to become involved.
- Encourage involvement so that Tenants and their families are at the heart of everything we do
- Empower Tenants through the provision of support, training and personal development.

OBJECTIVES

Our objectives are to:

- Monitor and review our approach and ensure that we meet the standards of best practice and the expectations of our Tenants.
- Comply with Government legislation and the regulatory requirements of The Tenants Services Authority.
- Create exciting, new methods of involvement which increases opportunities and take up
- Support, train and empower Tenants who wish to become involved.

- Ensure our approach meets the priorities of the business and our Tenants.
- Involve tenants in decisions around the reinvestment of efficiency savings
- Actively encourage and support under represented groups to become involved.
- Establish effective structures and methods for communicating and consulting with Tenants, obtaining regular feedback on their views, satisfaction levels and issues of concern:
- Identify and create further opportunities and structures for involvement, influence and empowerment primarily within the areas of neighbourhood, service delivery; and governance;

We will deliver our aims and objectives by enabling Tenants to:

- Be effectively supported to enable them to become involved
- Be involved in a way that meets their needs and wishes
- Receive training to enable them to understand and contribute to the business and understand any constraints
- Make their voice heard and to be consulted on issues that effect them
- Directly influence how we deliver services
- Scrutinise our performance
- Shape our strategic approach and priorities

EXTERNAL CONTEXT

The Tenants Services Authority (TSA)

The TSA is placing tenant involvement at the heart of its work. The TSA national conversation with tenants has identified a number of areas of concern for tenants in relation to involvement:

- Tenants want to be consulted, involved in decisions, and have high quality communications from their landlord
- Involvement should be broad, empowering and genuine
- Tenants want appropriate processes for dealing with service failure, an excellent complaint handling process, an opportunity to hold landlords to account – and to ensure they deliver on their promises
- Tenants expressed scepticism about mergers and group structures and their accountability to tenants.

The TSA national standards come into effect in April 2010. They are proposing a co-regulatory approach towards their standards framework, with tenants' views carrying as much weight as Landlords and the TSA. It is clear that they expect Tenants to be actively involved in scrutinising the services that they receive and influencing decisions around service delivery. We have taken an active role in helping to shape the national standards through our role as "trailblazer" for the National Tenant Conversation. We are also members of a national, virtual panel working with the TSA to design their national standards relating to customers excellence and choice. During 2010 we will need to produce our first comprehensive report to Tenants setting out how we are meeting the national standards.

By 2011 the TSA also expects Landlords to have developed a range of local standards in partnership with their tenants. The TSA are currently funding 37 pilot projects in order to test out how such standards can be developed. We are one of their pilots and are developing local standards relating to customer excellence and

choice across our supported housing services. The outcomes of our work will influence how local standards will be rolled out nationally.

The Audit Commission

Tenant involvement is fundamental to all inspections and the emphasis on it is growing with short notice inspections. Three resident involvement attributes appear in all three star reports:

- Involvement can be shown to have real impact on services and policies
- Wide range of means through which residents can participate in decision making
- Resident involvement is well resourced overall and local groups can obtain funding

Future inspections will be commissioned by The TSA using a risk analysis tool. The risk factors that they will consider include : performance against KPI's, Tenant satisfaction and approach to service improvement. On this basis it is unlikely that we will be selected for an inspection as we perform highly in these areas. However, excellent organisations are "ever ready" for an inspection should one be announced. To ensure that we remain "ever ready", we :

- Externally scan the outside world for best practice
- Scrutinise every Inspection Report
- Conduct gap analysis of our approaches against best practise
- Benchmark ourselves against others

During 2010 the TSA and The Audit Commission will review the inspection framework to ensure that the methodology and criteria used reflect the new national standards. They will consult on their proposals and findings.

INTERNAL CONTEXT

Vision and Values

Our Involvement Strategy is set within the context of our Corporate vision which sets out in broad terms what we are trying to achieve. Our Corporate objectives detail further how the vision will be achieved and these are then supported further by service plans that identify specific actions. Simply put, this plan sets out what we are trying to achieve and how we will measure success:

Our Vision Statement makes explicit our ambition to be "More than a Landlord through: Building communities, Valuing people and Delivering excellence." Our Values set out the approach we will adopt and how we will work. We will achieve our vision through:

Collaboration

We work hard at being a good partner, employer and landlord by involving and empowering people and working with one another. We listen, learn and reflect. We place people and communities at the centre of all we do and we encourage and welcome challenge.

Flexibility

We provide local, personal and responsive services and individual solutions where needed. We encourage people to think creatively and imaginatively.

Integrity

We never promise what we cannot deliver and we work in an open and transparent way. We are committed to providing equality of opportunity, we treat everyone with respect and we value people's differences. We own up when things do not go right and work hard at finding solutions.

Professionalism

We aim to deliver excellence in all we do. We are committed to working ethically and do all we can to help with environmental issues. We deliver value for money. We ensure staff are highly trained and developed.

Ambition

Known as an organisation that "punches above its weight", we are courageous, enthusiastic and innovative. We are committed to growth and delivering bespoke solutions even when it is not the easy option. We are involved in challenging work that benefits communities.

Structure

Tenant involvement is an integral part of the organisation, and we employ three specialist workers. We have dedicated Tenant Involvement Officers for Endeavour Housing Association and Teesdale Housing association. The role of the Tenant Involvement Officers is to explore new and innovative methods of involvement, whilst developing and strengthening existing models. The role of the Community Development Officer is to identify and co-ordinate activities that benefit the wider community and enhance community cohesion. This post is an Endeavour resource, although good practice in this area will be shared across the group.

Although we have 3 specialist posts, Tenant Involvement is "part of the day job" for all staff so there is a larger number of staff involved in strengthening our approach and delivering our strategy.

Funding

We offer financial support to residents who wish to set up a new group as well as ongoing support for recognised established associations. We also provide staff support and administrative assistance until Tenants are confident, trained and able to take on the role themselves. Our initial support is part of the overall aim to enable and empower Tenants.

Empowerment

Empowerment requires information, the ability to be heard, to hold providers to account, to influence service delivery and the decisions that we take. Tenant empowerment needs to be both individual and collective and requires a proactive approach. We support Tenants to become empowered in the following ways:

- Reviewing their training needs
- Identifying the core basic skills necessary for effective involvement
- Providing a diverse range of training opportunities for tenants

- We fund resident places at conferences and membership of trade bodies (TPAS, Community Matters, etc.)
- We help Tenants with support needs to become involved in the management of their homes. We enable them to do this in ways which meet their needs
- We provide support through meeting carer and transport costs and out of pocket expenses.
- Resident activists are given the opportunity to take part in away days and residentials where they hear about examples of good practice at a national level, debate topical issues, meet key staff, network with each other and take a strategic view of resident involvement.

Tenants' views

Our 2009 Status Survey showed that Tenants were highly satisfied (levels exceeded 89%) with the way in which they are consulted and informed. Tenants were less satisfied that their views were taken into account (levels ranged from 81% in supported housing to 79% across the rest of our stock) and this is an area where we need to improve

Co- regulation

Through the TSA National Conversation Tenants are saying they want to be more meaningfully involved. The TSA have been very clear that they expect tenants to be involved in regulation and influencing the work of housing providers. We feel that the time is right to begin exploring how co regulation might work and have started discussions with Staff and Board. It is likely that this work will start gaining momentum in 2010/11. This will be a significant shift to how we currently work. It is likely that we will need to carry out a recruitment campaign and spend at least six months training Tenants.

Some of our formal groups are advising us that they are satisfied that the services we provide are of good quality and that they would like to focus their activities on empowering communities and enhancing community cohesions. This means that there is a good "fit" with our aim to progress a co-regulatory approach through the development of a new group. This will enable Tenants to focus on the issues that matter to them.

Opportunities

Tenant involvement is approached through a range of methods; our Menu of Opportunity for Involvement details our commitment. Our involvement leaflets have been completely reviewed and have now been replaced by the "Resident Involvement – Your Guide to Getting Involved" document which clearly sets out involvement opportunities. These are included in our new tenancy packs.

We have improved the opportunities for involvement in the following ways:

- Increased the range of satisfaction surveys which give us an indication of satisfaction levels. This approach has led us to establish consultative groups which in turn have increased opportunities for involvement.
- Trained all staff on the importance of resident involvement.
- Involved tenants in more day to day work through the use of thematic, focus groups and service reviews.
- Developed tenant led improvement plans.
- Utilised different survey methods i.e. on line polls, text and telephone

- Surveyed our BME Tenants to identify if they wish to become more involved
- Analysed the make up of our existing groups, identified under representation and will be working to improve this.

Our approach maximises the opportunities for tenants to become involved in ways that meet their needs. These opportunities, fall within the five broad headings of Informing, Consultation, Providing feedback, Involvement and Management.

Informing

Providing good quality information in a way which meets tenant's needs is the foundation of successful involvement. We provide information in a variety of ways and utilise our Tenant profiling data to personalise our approach wherever possible. We use the following approaches:

- Annual report
- E-mail
- Text messages
- Handbooks
- Individual letters
- Information leaflets and flyers
- Newsletters
- One-to-one meetings
- Community meetings
- Sign-up packs
- Website

We will make sure that the printed information we give is clear, accessible and in the best format having sensible design and layout by:

- Consulting with Tenants on layout, content etc
- Ensuring our documents meet the Plain Language Commission's clear English standard
- Avoiding the use of acronyms and abbreviations
- Making sure information is available in large print, Braille, on CD and other languages (including using language line as necessary)
- Using clear language and avoiding using ambiguous terms or jargon

Consultation

Consultation builds on the approach which starts with the provision of information. It not only provides clear, objective information and choices it asks for responses which shape the end result. We consult on any issue that directly affects Tenants using the following methods:

- Comments cards
- Feedback slips
- Focus groups
- Home visits and surgeries
- Individual letters
- Open meetings
- Residents' Associations
- Staff visits to individual residents
- Surveys
- Meeting with established Tenants Groups

- Walkabouts (when a member of staff is available in the area or the street at a certain time for discussion)

We always provide detailed feedback to residents on the issues raised during consultation exercises

Gathering and responding to feedback

We gather feedback to enable us to capture the views of Tenants in order to improve what we do and how we do it. We gather feedback in a number of ways:

- On line, text, telephone and postal satisfaction surveys
- Focus Groups to look at specific issues in more depth
- Individual issue based meetings
- Small groups of supported housing tenants.
- Attendance at community groups and resident associations.
- Three yearly STATUS satisfaction surveys with annual samples
- On line polls

We not only gather feedback, we act upon it. We monitor our progress, plot results, publish the outcomes and benchmark ourselves against other organisations

Involvement

Involvement is an integral part of our approach. Involved Tenants need to have confidence that their voice will be listened to, and acted upon. They need training and developing so that they are confident and empowered enough to participate fully and effectively challenge us. (See previous section). Our approach to involvement is outcome focussed, in other words, what is it that tenants are aiming to achieve and do the available opportunities deliver this.

Management

The highest level of involvement occurs when Tenants have delegated powers and authorities in order to : manage their own homes, influence our priorities and challenge what we do. We have always supported Tenants who wish to become involved at this level which takes commitment, time and effort if it is to be meaningful.

We have places at Board reserved for Tenants. Tenant Board members have the same roles and responsibility as every other Board member. Any needs or requirements that they have are reflected in our Governance Improvement plan.

Board vacancies are advertised and new members are co-opted initially for a year. This enables us to provide induction and training and gives us, Board and the co-optees the opportunity to “test” out if there is an obvious “fit” and benefits to them becoming a full member. All Board members participate in an annual , formal appraisal

Monitoring and review

We challenge what we do and how we do it. We want to learn from others and improve. We also want to evidence the impact that involvement has on the business and our priorities. To do this we :

- Benchmark through our membership of the North East Benchmarking Group on resident involvement. This enables us to measure our performance against others and to share good practice.
- Gather feedback after every activity. This helps us get a tenants instant view of what is working, what didn't work and we use this to continually shape our approach
- Conduct impact assessments on involvement activity and use them to continue shaping our approach. Involved Tenants take part in this work so their views directly influence the overall assessment of whether the activity has been useful, what objectives were achieved, were there any barriers that affected their ability to participate. This information directly shapes our approach
- Capture the cost of our activities so we are able to analyse cost against outcomes and impact. This will help us demonstrate value for Money.
- Will review and update this strategy on an annual basis

Ongoing challenges

We are committed to continuous improvement. Effective involvement is an ongoing approach which directly benefits our tenants and the business. We are moving towards greater collaboration however there will always be challenges to face. We want to not only meet best practise, we want to set the pace. To do this we will :

- Identify under represented groups, work out what barriers exist and develop approaches which maximises opportunities
- Increase the numbers of tenants becoming actively involved and ensure that the profile is more representative of the tenant base
- Improve our system to track and monitor the costs of tenant involvement.
- Make better use of impact assessments.
- Develop our Tenant Inspectors
- Exceed the TSA national standards through the development of meaningful, tenant led local standards
- Train Tenants to be involved in the recruitment of staff
- Develop Tenant Compacts and Agreements
- Delegate more power to our Tenants. We will establish a "Tenants Voice" that will complement existing structures but add to the opportunities for different levels of involvement. The aim is to involve our Tenants in the regulation and scrutiny of what we do and how we do it. This work will be conducted with our Board and there will be some current Board powers delegated to the group.
- Successfully pilot local standards and maximise the opportunities to create best practice
- Work with existing groups to enable them to focus on the issues that matter to them
- Develop an approach that starts to work out what difference can we make to disadvantage communities to improve community cohesion.
- Review our approach towards the recruitment of Tenants Board members.

The remainder of this strategy outlines key information in relation to Endeavour and Teesdale Housing Associations and their approaches towards tenant involvement.

Endeavour Housing Association

Funding

We fund two full time members of staff. In addition we have an annual budget of around £23,000 that we use to fund involvement activities. £7,500 of this budget is managed by our Tenant Advisory Panel (TAP) this is used to fund their activities e.g. Tenants Conferences etc.

Involvement

We have the following formal mechanisms in place:

- Trained Mystery Shoppers
- Tenants Advisory Panel (that “shape” policies, procedures and leaflets)
- 4u group (specialist group consisting of people with disabilities)
- Thematic Groups influencing maintenance and housing services
- Tenant Maintenance Inspectors
- 2 x Editorial panels who approve the content of our newsletters (Supported Housing and General Needs)
- Supported Housing Involvement Steering Group
- An Older Persons group who are helping us to “future proof” our services and approach
- A Local Standards Group who are working with us to pilot TSA Local Standards for supported housing tenants. (“held” by the Supported Housing Involvement Group)

Representation

At present we have around 80 people actively involved in involvement groups and have analysed the make up of each group and compared this to the make up of our overall tenant base. Generally, overall levels of involvement are low. This does follow the national trend and appears to support the TSA view that Tenants who are more satisfied are less likely to become involved in formal groups. Our findings indicate that:

- We have good representation from people with Disabilities. This is particularly high in the Older Persons Group and 4U Group which is understandable. In general, it would appear that people with disabilities are more likely to become involved.
- All groups are made up of a high % of people aged over 60 and this is disproportionate when compared against the tenants’ base of 26%. Nationally Older People are more likely to be actively involved.
- Tenants under the ages of 55 are generally under represented. This is most apparent in the 16-24 and 25-34 age groups; however it’s good to see that the “Pilot” Steering Group is more representative.
- We also have significant under representation from Tenants who classify themselves as BME.
- The gender ratio is equitable.

Management

We have the following formal management arrangements with Tenants:

- A Tenant Management Co operative manages services on our behalf at Langridge Crescent in Middlesbrough. The co-op deal with all housing management functions (with the exception of arrears management) and allocate their own properties.

Prospective Tenants need to not only qualify for a vacancy on the grounds of housing need; they also need to meet the “co-operability criteria”. This means that the co-op assess a families commitment towards the principles of co-operative living and their willingness to engage.

This is a partnership venture between ourselves and our tenants and Erimus Housing Association and their Tenants. This co-op is well established and has existed for almost 20 years. We monitor activities and liaise closely with the co-op on day to day issues. However they are fairly self sufficient

- At Norton Grange we are key partners in a tenant management co-op that consists of ourselves and our tenants. We have worked more closely with this co-op in recent times due to a high turnover in management committee members.

We increased our involvement to enable the co-op to continue. Our recent involvement has focussed on encouraging involvement, building capacity within the group and ensuring that governance requirements are being effectively met.

Tenants’ views

TAP are advising us that they are satisfied that the services we provide are of good quality and that they would like to focus their activities on empowering communities and enhancing community cohesions. This means that there is a good “fit” with our aim to progress a co-regulatory approach through the development of a new group. This will enable Tenants to focus on the issues that matter to them.

STATUS 2009 showed that Tenants were generally, highly satisfied with how we keep them informed. Key data highlights :

- 90.4% of tenants expressed satisfaction with the overall service we provide
- 89% felt that we are good at keeping them informed
- 81% of supported housing tenants were satisfied that their views are taken into account, general needs tenants were 79.6% and 78.9% of tenants living in sheltered housing.
- 93% felt our newsletter is useful, easy to read and a good way of being informed

Teesdale Housing Association

Funding

The annual resident involvement budget of £6,000 is managed by our Tenants Consultative Group.

Involvement

We currently have the following mechanisms in place:

- Trained Mystery Shopper
- Tenants Consultative Group (that shape our policies and procedures)
- Estate inspections
- Surgeries and local drop-ins

Throughout 2010 we will be looking at developing a range of ways for residents to get involved with Teesdale Housing Association. These include:

- Setting up Residents Associations
- Developing an Editorial Panel for the Home Front tenants' newsletter
- Establishing a Readers Panel to look at the documents we produce
- Setting up a Group to help plan our Tenants Conference
- Establishing an older persons group

We will also be developing new methods of involvement for hard to reach tenants in our rural communities.

Representation

At present 16 people are involved in involvement groups and we have analysed the make up of those involved and compared it to our overall tenant base. Overall levels of involvement are low, although it is expected that once more groups are established this will increase considerably. Our findings indicate that:

- Involvement is made up of a high percentage of people aged over 60 years old which fits in with the tenants' base of 63%. Nationally older people are more likely to be involved.
- Tenants under the age of 55 are under represented, with no-one currently involved under the age of 40.
- There is also no involvement from anyone who classifies themselves as BME; however this fits in with the tenants' base of 99% White British/Irish.
- The gender ratio is 60% male and 40% female, which is disproportionate and goes against the tenants' base of 46% male and 56% female.

Tenants' views

STATUS 2009 showed that tenants were generally satisfied with how we keep them informed. Key data highlights are:

- 88% of tenants expressed satisfaction with the overall service that we provide.
- 83% of tenants felt that we are good at keeping them informed
- 74.4% of tenants were satisfied that their views are taken into account.
- 92.3% of tenants felt that our newsletter was useful, 97.9% felt that it was easy to read and 93.4% felt that the newsletter was a good way of keeping them informed.

We also seek our tenants' views through Customer Satisfaction Surveys and the Home Front tenants' newsletter. We have carried out an Environmental questionnaire to find out what our tenants would like to see happen on their estates, we have carried out an Anti Social Behaviour survey to find out what issues our tenants have in their communities.

The Tenants Consultative was established to give their views on our Service Standards, tenant welcome packs and lettable standards for our void properties. They are generally happy with the services we provide.