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Foreword

As the Cabinet Member for Housing, Planning, Improvement and Governance, I am delighted to introduce our new Housing Customer Engagement Strategy. This strategy is our pledge to ensure that every voice is heard as we shape the places we call home.

We know that good engagement leads to better outcomes which reflect the hopes, concerns and needs of our tenants and leaseholders. Whether it's improving our housing services or addressing local challenges, your insights and lived experiences are invaluable in shaping decisions that matter to you.

This strategy sets out how we will strengthen our relationship with customers. We will focus on making our processes transparent and inclusive, reaching out to everyone in our diverse community.

Thank you to everyone who has already shared their thoughts on developing this strategy. Together we can ensure our communities are not only a great place to live today, but for generations to come.

Councillor Chris Robinson

Cabinet Member for Housing, Planning, Improvement and Governance.

Introduction

Throughout this strategy where we refer to “customers”, we specifically mean the tenants and leaseholders of Stoke-on-Trent City Council.

Over recent years there have been big changes in social housing, with a stronger focus placed on empowering customers to have a real say in how their services are delivered; it is now more important than ever that our customers’ voices are heard.

We understand the best way to improve our housing services is by working closely with the people who rely on them daily – our customers. Your views and experiences are essential in helping us to shape services that truly reflect what you say are your priorities, and needs.

This new Housing Customer Engagement Strategy is our continued commitment to ensuring that your voice is always at the centre of what we do. It is about making your ideas and concerns the foundation of the decisions we make and the services we provide. Your voice matters, and together, we can create stronger communities.

“Working with the tenant engagement team has been both enjoyable and engaging. Their commitment to improving services really shows through, particularly in their efforts to engage with tenants at every level. It’s clear that they want to work with, not against, the tenants.”

Kiel – Involved Customer



What is customer engagement and why is it important

Customer engagement is about making sure our customers feel valued and have a say in everything we do, it is a co-operative process centred on listening and responding.

It is about involving you in the decision-making process, ensuring that you have a voice to influence the decisions made about your home and the services we provide.

Effective customer engagement comes from creating a meaningful, two-way communication that leads to stronger and better relationships between the council, and you, our customers. It is about developing an open forum for you to share your ideas and opinions.

Tenant Charter

With our engaged customers, we have created a Tenant Charter to enable a relationship of trust and mutual respect. The charter presents a clear framework of assurances regarding opportunities for engagement and the standards of service you can expect from us as landlord (see Appendix 3 for the Charter).

Why get involved with customer engagement?

As a customer, you have first-hand experience of our services, and by getting involved, you can help shape the services you receive. Getting involved gives you the power to influence decisions that directly affect your home and your neighbourhood every day. Your feedback helps us to ensure that our services meet your needs and allows us to make informed improvements.

Involvement also encourages a sense of community. Working together with other customers helps create a more connected community where everyone's needs are valued.



Getting Involved

We recognise that tenants and leaseholders want to give their views or be involved in different ways.

This is an opportunity for you to be able to take part in the decision-making process and influencing decisions about your home and the services you receive.

We want to encourage as many tenants and leaseholders as possible to have their say, become involved and participate in the housing service.

There are a variety of ways for you to work with us to help improve housing services.

Proactive Call

Receive a phone call to confirm your household details and give us your feedback.

Editorial Panel

We will ask you to read and review housing related documents for quality, relevance and content.

Tenant Voice

As a Tenant Voice member, you will be involved in key decisions that influence and shape service improvement across housing services.

Social Media

Follow us on social media to keep up to date with the latest news and events.

Focus Groups

These are made up of a small, diverse group of people brought together to discuss and provide feedback on a specific service.

Surveys

Complete online or postal surveys in the comfort of your own home.

Mystery Shopping

We need you to test our service areas by phone, online, email and in person giving feedback on your experience, both good and bad.



Tenant and Leaseholder Review Groups

Come along to regular group sessions with other residents and members of staff to give your views and ideas on housing services.



Equality impact

The council recognises that it provides housing for communities which include wide social diversity and is committed to providing equal access to services.

This policy aims to treat all customers fairly, with respect and professionalism. In line with the duty placed on the local authority under the Equalities Act 2010 specific consideration of the impact of this policy has been given to people with protected characteristics, including gender, race, age, disability, religion, care leavers, sexual orientation and marital status. The approach adopted within this policy focuses on understanding individual circumstances in order to provide appropriate advice and support; this includes understanding the needs of tenants who have protected characteristics. Consideration will therefore be given to language barriers, accessibility and cultural issues which may affect a tenant's ability to manage their tenancy or seek advice on problems, and resolutions which take account of the individual's beliefs and abilities.

The council will enable all of its tenants to have clear information and equal access to available services and information in a range of appropriate languages and formats and will be provided when requested. This policy has been designed to be fully inclusive regardless of the ethnicity, gender, sexuality, religious belief, or disability of service users or residents. The Equality Impact Assessment will be reviewed as part of reviewing the policy document in order to inform any changes that may be required.



From time to time the council may ask tenants to provide details of their gender, age, religion, disability, ethnicity and sexual orientation in line with the protected characteristics identified within the Equalities Act 2010 to help the council to deliver more effective, appropriate and inclusive policies and practices. All data collected is kept securely, used only for monitoring purposes and is de-personalised at the point of analysis to protect the individual's privacy.

Successes from the previous strategy

Since the publication of our first Housing Customer Engagement Strategy in 2021, we have undertaken a complete refresh of our customer engagement model. This includes establishing a new Tenant Voice group along with thirteen other specialised tenant scrutiny panels ranging from Anti-Social Behaviour to Repairs, with the option for tenants to participate in multiple groups. We have seen our number of engaged customers increase over the past two years to the current level of over 660 involved tenants and 11 leaseholders, a testament to your hard work and commitment. Together these groups provide a strong platform for transparency, influence and accountability in line with the Social Housing Regulator's new Consumer Standards.

A key success has been our focus to secure a diverse range of customer involvement across our activities. We have made a concerted effort to reach residents from a variety of backgrounds, taking into consideration protected characteristics such as age, gender, disability and race.

Between April 2022 and April 2023, our team of Housing Assistants made 11,585 proactive calls resulting in 4,288 customer surveys being conducted that cover satisfaction measures and information gathering.

Your insights continue to shape our services. For example, customer feedback led to the introduction of area based Anti-Social Behaviour officers, and the introduction of regular customer inspections of our high-rise blocks, along with many other initiatives aimed at making our communities safer and better maintained including: litter picks, graffiti removal and white goods removal.

We discuss fire safety with everyone surveyed and, if needed, provide a copy of the fire safety notice, available in sixteen languages. This ensures that customers living in blocks of flats with communal areas receive critical safety information in a clear, accessible way.

“It’s about having a real say in the decisions that affect our homes and communities.”

Jasim - Involved Customer



Strategic context – setting the scene

Consumer Standards

The strategy adheres to the government’s Consumer Standards guidance on Transparency, Influence and Accountability (April 2024). This will ensure that the key principles of the standards are met, in terms of how we approach customer engagement.

The Consumer Standards place a strong emphasis on the importance of clear communication and providing customers with a meaningful voice in the decision-making process. This will ensure that customers are respected, informed and have the power to influence the management of their homes and communities.

The 2025 Housing Customer Engagement Strategy reflects these principles by embedding meaningful engagement at all levels, ensuring our customers have a real voice in shaping the housing services that impact their lives.

The strategy also supports the principles of the council’s 2024 Corporate Strategy, Our City, Our Wellbeing, with its emphasis on collaboration and empowerment. As the Corporate Strategy states:

“Our instinct going forward will be how do we give power away to [...] communities to help them develop better solutions for themselves and others”.



Key Objectives

Key Objective One

To strengthen the communication between the council and its customers.

Developing positive communications with our customers is essential to improving our services. We recognise that by improving our communications, we will create better relationships, along with promoting a clearer understanding of our shared expectations.

Good communication is essential to improving our services and building a stronger relationship with customers. By improving how we communicate, we aim to create a clearer understanding of our services.

Strengthened communication will enable us to better understand our customers' needs and priorities, allowing us to shape the housing service to meet them more effectively. It also ensures that customers are informed about decisions, updates and service improvements in a timely and transparent way, promoting clarity and trust.

Actions:

- Establish frequent and clear customer communications.
- Support customers to be able to get involved.
- Make it easier for customers to get involved.
- Conduct customer feedback surveys.
- Share improvements we have made based upon customer feedback.



"Very interesting how the council and tenants come together to resolve problems and issues".

Involved Customer

Key Objective Two

To empower customers to have a voice in the council's decision-making processes.

Empowering customers is an essential element for improving the council's services. By encouraging customers to become more engaged, we aim to create a sense of shared responsibility to ensure that our services reflect the needs and preferences of our communities. This increased involvement will foster a greater connection to service improvement, which in turn will lead to a more tailored approach that will benefit all.

When customers are empowered to contribute, they will be given the opportunity to see the direct impact of their feedback on shaping our services, which encourages more involvement. It is through this sense of collaboration that we will build services which are better aligned to our communities' needs and ensuring your voices are heard and valued.

Actions:

- Work with a national recognised body to achieve Tenant Engagement Accreditation.
- Offer meaningful opportunities to influence the housing service.
- Create more opportunities for customer feedback.
- Involve customer early on in forming policies and strategies.
- Provide evidence of customer feedback improving services.



Key Objective Three

To promote a shared sense of civic pride in our communities.

Promoting civic pride is about a shared commitment to looking after our communities and neighbourhoods. It is about encouraging our customers to care for their lived spaces, to support one another and to create a cleaner, safer and more welcoming community.

As landlords, we will endeavour to make it easier for our customers to report issues and get involved in local initiatives through improved communication and engagement. We will ensure customers have a voice in local matters. We will support community-led projects that enhance shared spaces, making engagement a rewarding experience.

We hope by promoting a sense of civic pride, we can encourage greater care for our neighbourhoods, leading to cleaner, tidier spaces and stronger community cohesion. By working together to improve our surroundings, we can create a place where everyone feels proud to live.

Actions:

- Support community-led initiatives.
- Recognise contributions by volunteers.
- Promote clean estates campaigns.
- More public facing members of staff on estates.
- Publish opportunities for volunteering.
- Continue to work together to identify opportunities to improve areas.



Key Objective Four

To ensure that the services we deliver are responsive to customer needs and priorities.

We are committed to delivering services which meet our customer needs and priorities. We will achieve this by regularly gathering feedback through surveys, consultations and through more direct interventions. This will help us to better understand the needs of our customers and ultimately to improve the services we deliver.

By continuously evaluating customer feedback, and highlighting how to make compliments and complaints we will inform service improvements and our decision making. We will also provide customers with straightforward ways to share their views. This will promote a culture of responsiveness, while maintaining accountability and trust.

Actions:

- Promote ways for customers to feedback on the service.
- Monitoring and act on feedback.
- Involve customers in the development of the service to ensure we understand what is required.
- Supporting customers in giving feedback.
- Analyse complaints received and using that analysis to improve the service.



Key Objective Five

Transparency

We believe transparency is about being genuine and honest with one another. This is key to building stronger relationships and more engaged customers. To achieve this, we need to provide clear, accurate, and relevant information while ensuring accessibility for everyone by providing it in various formats and languages to support the diverse needs of our customers. Also, offering support in accessing the information. We are here to help you.

Being transparent also means actively involving customers in shaping our services and openly sharing how we use feedback and complaints to drive forward improvements.

Actions:

- Publishing information in different formats (e.g. paper copies, digital copies).
- Publishing information in different languages.
- Ensuring all information is clear and correct.
- Analysing complaints and compliments data and publishing findings.
- Involving customers in the development of the services.
- Sharing information on upcoming projects and gathering feedback.





Expenses

We truly value the dedication and contributions of our volunteers. To support you, we will reimburse reasonable expenses incurred during volunteer activities, such as travel costs. For more information, please refer to the Volunteer Expenses Information in Appendix Two.

Measuring Success, Monitoring and Reporting

In order to identify if the strategy has been successful, the following proposed outcomes will be monitored and measured to review progress:

- Monitor the Housing Customer Engagement Strategy delivery plan with our tenant groups.
- Increase the number of engaged customers.
- Ensure customers have accessible and transparent ways to communicate and participate.
- Create an accessible customer feedback system.
- Ensure diverse representation, including families, seniors, minority groups, and other underrepresented communities.
- Empower customers to propose their own ideas for service improvements.
- Facilitate customers who wish to lead on customer-led activities.
- Recognise and celebrate customers who take active roles in improving their communities and environment.
- Share regular updates showing how customer input has influenced our decisions.
- Regular surveys to customers about their satisfaction with services.
- Hold regular meetings with customers to maintain relationships and provide an open dialogue.

Conclusion

This strategy reflects the council's commitment to fostering a meaningful and productive relationship with our customers. By developing an open dialogue and a proactive approach to our service delivery, we aim to create a partnership that is built on trust. This strategy will serve as a foundation to ensure customers feel valued and actively involved in shaping the services that impact our residents.

As we move forwards, collaboration and accountability will remain at the centre of our approach. With sustained engagement and a focus on building stronger communities, we will deliver services that truly reflect the needs and aspirations of our customers. Together we can create a positive and lasting impact for all.



Appendix One

How to become an engaged customer:

Email the Housing Customer Engagement Team:

housing.engagement@stoke.gov.uk



Appendix Two

Stoke-on-Trent City Council Volunteer Expenses

Stoke-on-Trent City Council recognises the significant contribution volunteers make through their time and effort. It is our policy that volunteers should not incur out-of-pocket expenses due to their volunteering activities. We aim to ensure that potential volunteers are not deterred from participating due to personal costs. Therefore, volunteers are encouraged to claim any reasonable expenses incurred during their volunteering.

Principles

Taxis - If a volunteer does not have their own means of transport or prefers not to claim mileage, a Tenant Relations Officer will arrange for a taxi. Volunteers are expected to share taxis with others attending the event unless they have a disability that prevents them from doing so. Tenant Relations Officers will handle taxi bookings and process invoices directly. Volunteers are not permitted to book their own taxis.

Volunteers can claim:

- The cost of travel between home and the place of volunteering.
- Car park costs at the place of volunteering.
- Agreed travel or mileage costs incurred while volunteering, including car parking costs and bus fares.

If claiming mileage reimbursement, volunteers must hold a valid driving licence and inform their insurers that they are using their car for voluntary work. Speeding and parking fines are not reimbursable.

Travel expenses outside the Stoke-on-Trent City Council boundary, including travel between home and the place of volunteering, must have prior manager authorisation.

Activities likely to incur expenses for volunteers should be authorised by managers in advance. The council accepts no liability for expenses resulting from activities not agreed upon beforehand with managers.

Travel on public transport is encouraged and should be booked as far in advance as possible to take advantage of discounts. The council will pay for standard class travel only. Travel should be off-peak whenever possible and should utilise available discounts.

Pedestrian or bicycle travel is encouraged and does not qualify for expense claims.

Mileage Rates - Mileage rates for volunteer car or motorcycle expenses claims are aligned with those used by Stoke-on-Trent City Council for employee travel allowances. These rates apply regardless of engine size and are paid in accordance with current HMRC approved mileage rates.

Car Parking Rates - Car parking expenses will be reimbursed with proof, such as a windscreen ticket or online booking receipt. Volunteers are expected to park considerately and adhere to parking rules and restrictions. Stoke-on-Trent City Council will not be responsible for any parking fines incurred.

Expense Claims - All volunteers must claim expenses by completing the Volunteer Expenses Claim Form. Claims should be signed by the volunteer and the authorising manager. If submitted via email, the email should be attached to confirm the claim, and the authorising manager can sign and submit the form to finance.

Expense claims should be submitted within three months of the expenditure occurring. Claims older than three months will not be accepted. Receipts must be provided for all expense claims.

Payment of Expenses - To ensure efficient use of resources, payments are made via BACS (directly into your bank account). Before claiming any expenses, volunteers must submit the following information to housing.engagement@stoke.gov.uk:

- Bank Account Number
- Sort Code
- Name on the account
- Copy of a paying-in slip or statement header

All information will be collected and held in accordance with the General Data Protection Regulation.

Additional Information:

Stoke-on-Trent City Council will not make payments over and above actual incurred costs, as this could be regarded as a payment and affect tax and state benefits. Only actual costs incurred can be reimbursed; expenses do not represent a reward or compensation for loss of time. The council does not give honoraria payments to volunteers, as this can be regarded as payment for services, affecting the legal status of volunteers.

Tax - All taxation matters are the responsibility of the individual. If you are claiming over 10,000 miles in any tax year, you have a legal requirement to declare your expenses.

Appendix Three

The Tenant Charter has six guiding principles:

- Responsibility.
- Trust and mutual respect.
- Communication.
- Tenant voice.
- Listen and act.
- Quality home and safe neighbourhood.



To promote respectful collaboration, in return, we expect tenants to adhere to the following principles and responsibilities:

- Be respectful towards council staff.
- Report any repairs to us immediately so that we can schedule a visit as quickly as possible.
- Allow access to your property for essential building safety checks.
- Inform us of any changes to your circumstances so that we can keep our records up to date.
- Make use of our digital platforms as much as you are able.
- Keep appointments or inform us in good time if you need to cancel.
- Provide us with constructive feedback to help us improve our services.