

**HOMES POLICY DEVELOPMENT GROUP
18 JANUARY 2022**

**THE DRAFT TENANT INVOLVEMENT AND EMPOWERMENT STANDARD
POLICY**

Cabinet Member(s): Cllr Bob Evans, Cabinet Member for Housing

Responsible Officer: Mrs Claire Fry, Operations Manager for Housing Services

Reason for Report & Recommendation: The landlord service, Mid Devon Housing, is currently reviewing previously adopted policies with the aim of rationalising them and ensuring that they support work to ensure regulatory compliance. To this end, policies are being more closely aligned with each of the individual Standards within the regulatory framework.

Recommendation: That Members recommend the adoption of the Draft Tenant Involvement and Empowerment Standard policy to the Cabinet.

Financial Implications: The work of Mid Devon Housing (MDH) is funded through the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) and there is a budget set aside within this account to support tenant involvement and engagement. There is a Housing Complaints Officer whose role is funded through the HRA and there is a budget to support the payment of compensation in cases where complaints are upheld. Recharges are made from the HRA to the General Fund in respect of work undertaken corporately with regard to the management of contacts with tenants.

Budget and Policy Framework: The HRA must balance but there are funds set aside within it to support the activity required to deliver regulatory compliance with the Tenant Involvement and Empowerment Standard. This new policy refers to corporate policies and includes the revised strategy relating to tenant involvement and the refreshed approach to the management of compensation and redress set out in the appendices.

Legal Implications: MDH is a social landlord and is registered with the Regulator for Social Housing (RSH), meaning that it is a Registered Provider (RP). The RSH sets consumer standards and the Tenant Involvement and Empowerment Standard is one of these. The role of the regulator is to intervene where failure to meet the standards has caused, or could have caused, serious harm to tenants. MDH is also obliged to manage complaints in line with the Complaints Handling Code issued by the Housing Ombudsman Service (HOS) and completed a self-assessment against this, which is available to view on the Council's webpages, in line with the requirements of the HOS.

Risk Assessment: Agreed housing policy provides a framework for decision-making which ensures that customer-facing teams deliver consistency in the discharge of duties to support good housing management. This ensures that both properties and tenancies are managed effectively and reduces reputational risk.

Equality Impact Assessment: MDH is required to work with people from all sections of society and having agreed policy ensures that all tenants and other

stakeholders are treated in the same way with adjustments being made to meet their needs, as necessary.

Relationship to Corporate Plan: Homes and the environment are a priority for the Council and this includes increasing the supply of affordable homes in the District and also supporting and growing active tenant engagement

Impact on Climate Change: The pandemic has resulted in increased internet usage and therefore an increased ability amongst the population at large to use social media and other digital conferencing platforms. Officers of MDH are now using electronic means of communication with tenants and other stakeholders more frequently which reduces printing and paper usage. Our tenant involvement offer, should the policy be agreed, should result in more digital engagement and less face to face meetings which will reduce mileage incurred by Officers to locations some distance from the office and the associated resources relating to heating halls for meetings etc.

1.0 Introduction/Background

- 1.1 The Council, in its role as a social landlord, is required to deliver compliance with the four Consumer Standards within the Regulatory Framework for Social Housing.
- 1.2 There are currently four Consumer Standards: the Tenant Involvement and Empowerment Standard; the Home Standard; the Tenancy Standard; and the Neighbourhood and Community Standard.
- 1.3 The Social Housing White Paper, published in November 2020, announced a move towards a full consumer regulation regime where the Regulator for Social Housing (RSH) will be more proactive in order to ensure compliance with the revised Consumer Standards. This is likely to involve Registered Providers (RPs) such as Mid Devon Housing (MDH) having to give assurances to the RSH which will take a risk-based approach.
- 1.4 The RSH recently published a paper: “Reshaping Consumer Regulation: Our Principles and Approach” with six new themes replacing the Standards currently in use. These were stated as follows: Safety; Quality; Neighbourhood; Transparency; Engagement and Accountability; and Tenancy. The theme relating to Engagement and Accountability is likely to incorporate the requirements of the existing standard relating to Tenant Involvement and Empowerment. However, in the aftermath of the fire at Grenfell Tower in 2017, there is some expectation that the new regime will require social landlords to work much more closely with tenants and other residents on the estates which they manage. This is likely to involve a need to offer greater opportunities for scrutiny and to drive forward service improvements to deliver a better service to those in receipt of it.
- 1.5 The new regime can only be implemented once relevant legislation has received Royal Assent. There may some delay in getting this passed and onto the Statute Book. However, the RSH has indicated that RPs should work towards compliance with the new regime as a matter of good practice.

2.0 The Tenant Involvement and Empowerment Standard

- 2.1 Each of the existing standards within the regulatory framework contains a number of required outcomes and specific expectations. In this standard, there are several strands which relate to discreet areas of work. These are:
 - 2.1.1 The need to deliver information about services available to tenants and the standards which can be expected
 - 2.1.2 A requirement to offer a clear, simple and accessible approach to the management of complaints which results in these being resolved promptly, politely and fairly.
 - 2.1.3 A requirement that RPs, such as the Council, offer opportunities to tenants to get involved in many aspects of our work including the development of housing-related policies and strategic priorities.
 - 2.1.4 A requirement which relates to respect, and the need to treat all tenants fairly. RPs need to be able to demonstrate that they understand the different needs of their tenants, including in relation to equality strands and to additional support needs of tenants.

3.0 The Draft Tenant Involvement and Empowerment Standard Policy

3.1 Customer Service, Choice and Complaints

- 3.1.1 Since MDH is a Service positioned within a Council with retained housing stock, there are a number of corporate policies which support its work. With regard to the need to deliver regulatory compliance in relation to the Tenant Involvement and Empowerment Standard, those relevant include the corporate Complaints Policy and the corporate Vulnerability Policy which are currently being reviewed; the corporate Customer Care Standards, which are also being reviewed; and the Single Equality Scheme. These corporate documents are referenced within the new draft policy.
- 3.1.2 In addition, guidance relating to compensation has been attached to the new draft policy as an appendix. This has been revised to take account of the need to resolve complaints made by tenants, locally if possible. This is a requirement of the Housing Ombudsman Service which also puts great emphasis on the need to offer redress in cases where there has been service failure or where a complaint is upheld for other reasons. Frequently, compensation would be seen as a form of redress which can be paid to resolve the complaint and in recognition of service failure or distress caused as a result of this.
- 3.1.3 It should be noted that MDH will be refreshing the approach to the use of social media as a means of communicating with tenants shortly. However, as part of the review of involvement and engagement activity currently ongoing, consideration is being given to a revival of our tenant's newsletter and other ways of engaging with tenants on a regular basis including as part of focus groups, by email and on a face to face basis.

3.2 Involvement and Empowerment

- 3.2.1 Following a restructure, there is a customer engagement team which is managed by the Customer Engagement Co-ordinator. This team is dedicated to developing our offer to tenants in relation to scrutiny activities, consultation and increased information.
- 3.2.2 The strategy relating to tenant involvement has been refreshed and the new approach has been documented and attached to the new draft policy as an appendix.
- 3.2.3 The Tenant Involvement Strategy included in the new draft policy represents a new approach to this area of work. As a result of the pandemic, there seems to be an increased willingness for people generally to engage online. Since this offers opportunities to support the engagement of those who traditionally did not engage with us, including younger tenants, those with caring responsibilities with no access to respite, and those who do not drive, the strategy supports activity to increase digital engagement whilst at the same time promoting face to face meetings where needed.
- 3.2.4 The format of the document will allow the publication of the new strategy independently showing that the approach has changed; the design makes it more engaging and more accessible to those who would perhaps tend to shy away from reading a long and wordy document.
- 3.2.5 The strategy has been written in such a way as to set out the options available for tenants to get involved, showing the amount of commitment required, without being too prescriptive.
- 3.2.6 During the pandemic, Officers focused on reaching out to vulnerable people and work relating to more formal tenant involvement activity was paused. The new strategy allows for new methods of engagement to evolve naturally which take advantage of new ways of working with stakeholders, whilst still offering more traditional ways of getting involved.

3.3 Understanding and responding to the diverse needs of tenants

- 3.3.1 Housing applicants are required to provide data about their health and general circumstances as part of their housing application on Devon Home Choice. This informs their priority for rehousing. This information informs risk assessments and is fed through to the Neighbourhood teams once a home is allocated to a prospective tenant. Therefore, there is generally more information available to customer-facing teams about new tenants. Until the pandemic, there was a programme of Tenancy Home Checks (THCs), otherwise known as tenancy audits, and over 70% of our tenants had been visited over a period lasting some years. Any new information disclosed was updated to our electronic housing system. The programme of THCs was paused until such time as the risk of infection is considerably reduced on the basis that most tenants are unlikely to welcome an unannounced visit involving an inspection of their home and discussion of their needs.

3.3.2 Therefore, MDH has good insight into the varying needs of tenants and the Customer Engagement Co-ordinator has been tasked with reviewing the approach with the aim of ensuring that this informs service delivery, policy development and our approach to increasing customer satisfaction levels.

3.3.2 It should also be noted that the electronic housing management system enables the use of flags on individual tenant records showing communication preferences, special needs relating to home visits and so on. This may include reference to someone being hard of hearing, for example, but able to lip read, necessitating the use of a special facemask designed to enable someone to see the lips of the wearer.

3.3.3 There is a large cohort of tenants with multiple and complex needs whose lifestyles may be described as chaotic. The Neighbourhood teams work in partnership with a wide range of other agencies to support such tenants but there is an acknowledgement that working with such tenants can be resource-intensive and difficult. Furthermore, some individuals can have a profound impact on their local communities if their behaviour is such that it causes nuisance to neighbours.

4.0 Feedback on Activity relating to Tenant Involvement

4.1 There will be an annual update to the Policy Development Group (PDG) detailing the number of tenants actively involved with the work of MDH and showing which activities are proving to be of most interest to people wishing to make a contribution to the running of the Service.

5.0 Recommendation

5.1 That Members of the PDG recommend the adoption of the Draft Tenant Involvement and Empowerment Standard policy to the Cabinet.

Contact for more Information: Mrs Claire Fry, Operations Manager for Housing Services, telephone: 01884 255255 (via callback), email: cfry@middevon.gov.uk

Circulation of the Report: Cllr Bob Evans, Cabinet Member for Housing; Leadership team; Corporate Management Team

List of Background Papers:

Gov.uk, "Guidance, Regulatory Standards", last updated 1 April 2020
<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/regulatory-standards#consumer-standards>

Gov.uk, the "Tenant Involvement and Empowerment Standard" published 1 July 2017

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/tenant-involvement-and-empowerment-standard/tenant-involvement-and-empowerment-standard-2017>

Housing Ombudsman Service, "Complaints Handling Code", published July 2020

<https://www.housing-ombudsman.org.uk/landlords-info/complaint-handling-code/>

Gov.uk, "Reshaping Consumer Regulation: Our Principles and Approach", published 17 November 2021

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/reshaping-consumer-regulation-our-principles-and-approach>