

To: Cabinet
Date: 11th December 2024
Report of: Executive Director of Communities and People
Title of Report: Reset of Oxford City Council’s Approach to Tenant Engagement and Tenancy Management

Summary and recommendations	
Purpose of report:	To set out and seek approval for the reset of the Council’s Tenant Engagement work, in its role as a social landlord and in alignment with the new Consumer Standards issued by the Regulator for Social Housing.
Key decision:	Yes
Cabinet Member:	Councillor Linda Smith, Cabinet Member for Housing and Communities.
Corporate Priority:	Good, Affordable Homes, Thriving Communities.
Policy Framework:	Housing, Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy 2023-2028.

Recommendation(s): That Cabinet resolves to:
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> To approve the adoption and implementation of the new approach to Tenant Engagement as set out in this report. Delegate authority to the Executive Director of Communities and People (Interim) to make any further changes as necessary in line with service development and new legislation.

Appendices
Appendix 1 – Risk Register

Introduction

- The Council’s 40-year Housing Revenue Account (HRA) Business Plan (BP), combined with the requirements of the [Social Housing Regulation Act 2023](#) (the “SHA”) and its associated [Consumer Standards](#) sets out the new housing legislation, inspection regime and strategic financial context that guides Oxford City Council as a social landlord. The new consumer standards are designed to protect tenants and improve the service they receive.

2. This is a changing landscape and one that expects the Council to engage with its 19,500 occupants across nearly 8000 homes in a proactive way, both in terms of engagement and management.
3. Alongside the other December 2024 Cabinet reports relating to a) the HRA Business Plan and b) a new Asset Management strategy and 5-year investment programme, this report sets out and seeks approval for a new approach to tenant engagement and tenant management that will put tenants' voices at the heart of our work to ensure our compliance with the Consumer Standards.

Raising our Tenant Engagement

4. Following the Grenfell tragedy, the Social Housing Regulation Act 2023 sought to strengthen the voice of tenants by setting out clearer expectations of social landlords. The [Transparency, Influence and Accountability Standard](#) requires the landlord to be open with tenants and treat them with fairness and respect so that they can access services, raise concerns when necessary, influence decision making and hold their landlord to account.
5. This is essentially a call for a change to a two-way conversation between tenant and landlord – where there is a need to give tenants their voice by providing meaningful engagement opportunities to enable them to influence and scrutinise the Council's strategies, policies and services, and where the landlord in turn is able to communicate clearly with tenants. This in turn will help the Council to respond better to what our tenants want and need whilst also delivering its services clearly.
6. This activity however should be seen as the business of the whole Council and would feature particularly in areas such as preventing homelessness, tenancy management and sustainment, asset management and capital programmes, house building, green and clean neighbourhoods, community safety, parks and leisure as well as the core functions of tenancy management.

Building a new Approach – a more structured way of engaging tenants

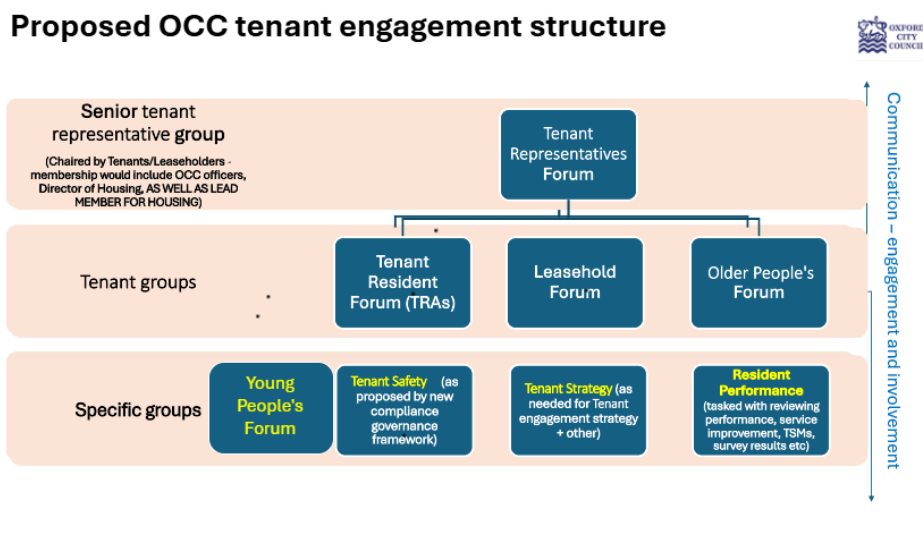
7. OCC has approximately 19,500 occupants across its housing stock and there is a requirement to provide a diverse but also structured way of engagement, alongside good communication and publication of key performance, data, policies and information. A desk top review of the service and approach concluded that the current arrangements are based on a relatively limited, but highly committed group of tenant ambassadors, with a focus on specific areas of interest across a number of established groups. The review also looked at our data in terms of what our tenants tell us when raising complaints as well as our tenants' priorities in terms of their homes.
8. The review found that further work is required to:
 - establish clearer governance structures with which tenants can engage on a broader range of issues, contribute to service development, hold the Landlord to account and ensure they have a voice at the top table. This

should include specific and specialist groups around e.g. Tenant Safety, Compliance, and Complaints;

- ensure that the requirement to engage with tenants is understood across the Council, and across all Landlord-related functions, some of which sit outside the Housing Service as they are subject to the same requirements;
 - update and refresh our data and understanding of our tenants and their needs, in order to shape our services to meet those needs and ensure a proactive approach;
 - further the development of a new Tenant Engagement strategy that will encompass the reset and ensure compliance with the Consumer Standards and our future approach to the work;
 - improve communication across a variety of engagement platforms (e.g. the website and newsletters) to ensure they are accessible to tenants, providing clear information on a range of issues and performance.
9. With several key building blocks in place including a well-resourced team, we have the opportunity to better join up and align the engagement approach to maximise the use of resources to deliver the best outcomes for tenants and ensure full compliance with the Transparency, Influence and Accountability Standard.

Proposed new Tenant Engagement Structure

10. As part of this reset, the first step was to design a draft governance structure across the Landlord function to enable tenants to engage with the Council at a range of different levels, creating a golden thread through the organisation. This is illustrated in the diagram below:-



11. It is proposed to set up 3 key Tenant Groups: e.g, Tenant Forum, Leasehold Forum and a Older People's Forum. These will enable different groups, with common interests to come together under specific terms of reference, supported

and facilitated by Council officers, with agendas, minutes and other information as appropriate.

12. Members from these three specific forums will then be represented on the broader Tenant Representative Forum which will also include OCC officers and the Head of Housing. Specific terms of reference will be developed but it will be an opportunity for the 3 groups to feed in key issues to the Landlord, as well as for OCC officers to bring forward information on service delivery, services development, performance and monitoring.
13. At the top of the governance structure, will be a Tenant Engagement Forum – which will potentially be led (or jointly led) by the Portfolio Holder for Housing where tenants will make their key representations to the Lead Member who in turn will raise these key issues at Cabinet.
14. In addition, specific groups – including task and finish groups – will also be created, linking the tenants' voice to all aspects of the Landlord's work including Tenant Safety and Compliance, Tenant Engagement Strategy, Data and Performance and a Young People's Forum.

Proposals for Delivery

15. To deliver this work, a sequential workplan has been drafted to ensure tenants are able to and are supported to engage. Our first steps will be to:
 - establish roadshow meetings with tenants across our stock and estates to engage and introduce the draft reset plan and gain input/buy-in to ensure as broad and diverse a tenant base as possible;
 - develop an internal operating model that will enable formal recognition of tenant groups by OCC which will include a review of budgets to facilitate tenants coming together, locations where this can happen easily, specifically, small community centres;
 - run an engagement and involvement campaign to increase tenant awareness, involvement and representation;
 - once groups are established, develop a training and development programme to support them and the housing teams;
 - develop a communication plan in line with the Consumer Standards for sharing engagement, activities and performance to groups;
 - redesign job descriptions in line with the broader re-organisation described below.
16. It is recommended therefore that Cabinet approve this reset and approach and delegates authority to the Executive Director for Housing and Communities to make any further changes in line with service development and changes to legislation.

Landlord Services Re-organisation

17. The tenant engagement reset sits within the broader re-organisation of the Landlord Service which is due to launch in the New Year.

18. The aim of the re-organisation is to create a modern Tenancy and Housing Management service that prioritises customer excellence, responds to tenants' needs in order to prevent problems with their tenancies improves the quality of their homes and enhances the quality of their lives. It will be a new service where staff have pride in what they do and how they do it, and in doing so make a difference to tenants' lives
19. The core objectives will be to support and enable tenants to live in their properties as independently as possible, providing practical support when needed, improving customer satisfaction which in turn will lead to a reduction in complaints. The new service will focus on 4 key strands:

Tenant Engagement:

20. The voices of our tenants should be clearly reflected in our work – from our policies to the shape of our services – and there is significant strategic work needed to develop this area.
21. A new Tenant Involvement and Engagement strategy that sets out a clear direction of travel to:
 - increase and diversify the tenants that are engaging with us, providing a range of ways to engage that suit our tenants depending on their circumstances;
 - set out a clear plan of accountability, enabling our tenants to shape and provide feedback on the services we provide them, including the development of a Tenant and Leaseholder Board at the highest level;
 - improve our communication and transparency – sharing our performance data and inviting feedback and follow up;
 - further evolve our complaint handling, ensuring that ownership is taken at the first opportunity to prevent issues escalating, but that the necessary learning and feedback is driven back through the service.

Respond better to tenants' needs:

22. Serving our communities and tenants should be our driving force, and a key motivator for our staff. Taking a proactive, preventative approach will not only benefit tenants but also ease the high demand and financial pressure on the Council.
23. We want our tenants to be happy in their homes and in their communities. We need to be proactive to identify and solve problems to prevent them escalating when they could very simply be resolved if we knew about them and acted at the right time.
24. We need to ensure that we provide a high level of services to all our tenants, whilst targeting response to a minority who may need them most, as well as those that cause problems for others.
25. We must also ensure that people can live safely in their homes. Often this may come down to recognising that the most vulnerable need a range of services,

including domestic abuse, mental health support, Occupational Therapy assessments, aids or adaptations, or even different kinds of accommodation.

26. Resetting this relationship between officers and tenants is crucial. This will require a redefinition of job roles and the deployment of a range of soft skills.

Looking after our Estates better:

27. We need to give greater priority to how we care for our estates by creating a new regime of estate inspections, which will co-ordinate with the caretaking and cleaning services currently delivered by ODS. This will identify the day-to-day improvements needed, responding to them swiftly and effectively.
28. The service will also interact with the Property Team, identifying and supporting where more extensive communal and estate-based work is required to comply with the Neighbourhood Standard.

Providing Better Jobs for our Staff

29. Delivering these services to our tenants will require a workforce with the right skills for the right jobs, that take responsibility and accountability and communicate effectively with tenants and Members. All roles will reflect the new Competency and Conduct Standard of the Regulator for Social Housing (RSH).
30. As we expand the Council's stock either via new supply or acquisitions, we should expect that tenancy officers will encounter new job functions. These new functions should be seen as opportunities for acquiring additional skills and competencies for many, including the tenancy management of new stock. We have therefore acknowledged the need to redefine the job roles and create new ones to ensure compliance with the SHA.
31. In order to effect the right cultural change, we will prepare a full departmental Training and Development Plan to ensure that all staff access refresher course and where appropriate bespoke training in areas necessary to fulfil the requirement of existing and future job descriptions. We will also need to ensure that all staff make effective use of the new performance management arrangements, to help increase engagement between manager and employees and increase staff development and wellbeing.

Reform our ICT and digital customer interfaces

32. Further exploiting QL a key tool in the transformation work in this area. including the embedding of a new tenant portal new portal which will allow tenants to access core landlord functions to self-service 24/7 whether they are at home or at work and regardless of what device they are using.
33. Improved data quality and management information via Power BI, will greatly improve the ability of staff to work effectively. Staff will be able to use the additional time to be free up by greater automation and mobile working to focus on residents who need help the most, or to take more time to work on their personal development.

Financial implications

34. In the 2024/25 budget setting round an additional £862k was approved for resources to ensure compliance with the requirements of the Regulator for Social Housing, including Tenant Engagement and Tenant Involvement.

35. Whilst budgets will be reviewed to ensure delivery, it is anticipated that as a result of efficiency and modernisation that the new service will deliver within the current financial envelope as set out in the Council's Medium Term Financial Plan.

Legal issues

36. This work seeks to strengthen the Council's alignment and compliance with the Social Housing Act 2023 and its associated Consumer Standards.

Level of Risk

37. Please see risk register, attached in Appendix 1

Equalities Impact Assessment

38. A full Equalities Impact Assessment was carried out as part of the development of the Housing, Homelessness and Rough Sleeping strategy. There are no adverse impacts in implementing the specific recommendations of this report, with particular attention being paid to increasing both diversity and inclusive opportunity for our tenants to engage.

Carbon and Environmental Considerations

39. There are no carbon or environmental considerations as part of this report.

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Background Papers: None

Please note in the table below the version number of your report that was finally cleared at each stage

Report Stage	Version Number
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First Draft: <i>Commissioned and cleared by Director</i>	V2
Second Draft: <i>Cleared by Legal and Finance</i>	V3
Final Draft: <i>Cleared by the Board Member</i>	V4
Final Report: <i>Cleared by Labour Group</i>	