



**NORTHAMPTON**  
**BOROUGH COUNCIL**

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**Tenant Engagement Strategy**

**2013-16**

**Draft December 2012**

**TENANT ENGAGEMENT STRATEGY**

**“Working together to make a difference”**

**TRANSLATION STRAPLINE PAGE**

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## VERSION CONTROL

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## Contents

	Background and Supporting Legal / Guidance Documents	5
	Introduction	6
	Why do we need a Tenant Engagement Strategy?	6
	What is Tenant Engagement?	6
	Promoting and Valuing Equality and Diversity	7
	Aims and Objectives of the Strategy	10
	Tenant engagement and the bigger picture	10
	Tenants' legal rights to involvement	12
	Ways in which you can get involved	13
	Tenant Engagement Service Standards	19
	Monitoring and Review of the Strategy	23
	Complaints and Dispute Resolution	23
	Tenant Engagement – the future	24
	Proposed Engagement Model for Scrutiny	27

## **Background and Supporting Legal / Guidance Documents**

- The Regulatory Framework for Social Housing in England 2010 & 2012
- Housing & Regeneration Act 2008
- Review of Social Housing Regulation – DCLG 2010
- Localism Act 2011
- Housing Act 1985
- Equality Act 2010
- Public Services (Social Value) Act 2012
- Northampton Borough Council – “Our Approach to Equalities”

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## 1. Introduction

This Tenant Engagement Strategy sets out the commitment of Northampton Borough Council to Tenant / Customer engagement as an essential aspect of its housing service. Tenant engagement is characterised by constant change and the regulatory framework governing tenant engagement, involvement and empowerment has changed significantly in the last few years, placing a greater emphasis on accountability and “co-regulation”.

The **Tenant Engagement Strategy 2013-16**, is the first stage of turning goals into reality and with tenants’ involvement this should result in better decision-making and a quality housing service.

This strategy demonstrates how Northampton Borough Council and tenants (inclusive of leaseholders) will work in partnership together to shape and deliver a high quality housing service.

Northampton Borough Council has a long established commitment to engaging with its local communities, and recognises its responsibility to involve local people in the issues that affect or interest them. This will be undertaken in a way that offers choice and flexibility for people to become involved by offering a number of different engagement opportunities.

It is recognised that Northampton Borough Council has a continually evolving and diverse customer base and as such continued efforts are needed to promote equality and diversity and develop links with all under-represented groups including black, minority and ethnic groups, young people and those with vulnerabilities or disabilities.

## 2. Why do we need a Tenant Engagement Strategy?

Nationally tenant engagement strategies and agreements are part of the Governments’ agenda to improve services for local people and place tenants at the heart of decision-making and service delivery on issues that relate to the management of Housing stock.

We want to make sure that we are transparent in our plans and that our tenants and leaseholders can hold us to account for the actions we take. We feel this should be at the heart of our move towards co-regulation. The Housing and Regeneration Act 2008 introduced statutory objectives aimed at empowering tenants and ensuring that they had the opportunities to shape services and standards (co-regulation). This will require a change in culture and practice, where NBC management have responsibility for corporate performance. This will empower tenants to shape the decision-making process and hold them to account for service delivery as well as setting the strategic direction for the authority. The development of the tenants’ scrutiny role will put tenants in the driving seat of setting standards and monitoring our performance against those standards. Services will be more accountable to tenants.

## 3. What is Tenant Engagement?

Tenant engagement is about Northampton Borough Council and its tenants working together in partnership by involving tenants at an early stage in the decision making

about the services they receive or decisions that affect their homes and neighbourhood, ensuring that they are aligned to local expectations so as to achieve an improved housing service.

Key to effective engagement is listening to our tenants and using their views to help us develop and improve the housing service provided.

Effective tenant engagement is about understanding the needs, expectations, aspirations, achievements and experiences of Northampton Borough Council's existing and prospective tenants as well as its leaseholders whilst continually improving its housing service as a result.

#### 4. Promoting and Valuing Equality and Diversity

Northampton Borough Council recognises the importance of equality of opportunity for all our tenants. We aim to achieve equality of opportunity by ensuring commitment to the provision of readily accessible services and facilities and by encouraging engagement practices which take account of the diversity of groups and individuals. We will strive to ensure that our engagement activities are inclusive to all in accordance with the Equality Act 2010 and free from discrimination on the grounds of age, disability, gender and gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex or sexual orientation.

Northampton Borough Council monitors the profile of its tenants. The breakdown of the key groups as at September 2012 is as follows: -

<b>Ethnicity</b>	<b>% Of tenant base</b>
White British	69.7%
Black or Black British	8.62 %
White Other	12.99%
Asian or Asian British	2.04%
Mixed race	1.90 %
Other	4.78 %
<b>Age</b>	
16-25	6.29 %
25-40	26.82%
41-64	40.73 %
65+	26.16 %
<b>Employment</b>	
Full-time – 30 hrs>	16.33 %
Part-time - < 30 hrs	7.47%
Retired	38.48 %
Unemployed	16.21 %
Unable to work (medical/disability/carers)	20.69 %
Student or Government training scheme	0.81 %
<b>Disability</b>	
Yes	31.22%
No	68.78 %

Local evidence has shown that Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) tenants as well as young tenants are significantly “under-represented” at most levels of tenant engagement. To help address this issue, resources have been identified to support projects aimed at encouraging active engagement across tenure in all communities within the Borough.

In May 2010 Northampton Borough Council established a Black, Minority Ethnic (BME) forum. This was developed with the primary aim of ensuring that the needs and views of BME tenants and residents are clearly heard and considered when developing/reviewing-housing services provided by Northampton Borough Council.

This forum plays a crucial role in the monitoring of the BME Housing Strategy and developing ways in which they can influence service delivery. New members are always welcome at the forum meetings and further details can be obtained from either the Community Engagement or Customer Engagement Teams if required and arrangements will be made to ensure that tenants receive language and communication support to actively participate in the forum.

A young tenant’s forum was introduced in 2010 following the delivery of our annual “Helping Hands” life skills programme for young tenants aged 16-25 years. The forum provides young tenants with an opportunity to voice their opinions and influence housing services. It is acknowledged that innovative methods of engagement may be required to ensure the fullest engagement of this particular group.

Northampton Borough Council also has an active Sheltered Housing forum, meeting quarterly with residents who have volunteered to represent their sheltered housing neighbours and provide us with feedback and suggestions for improvement.

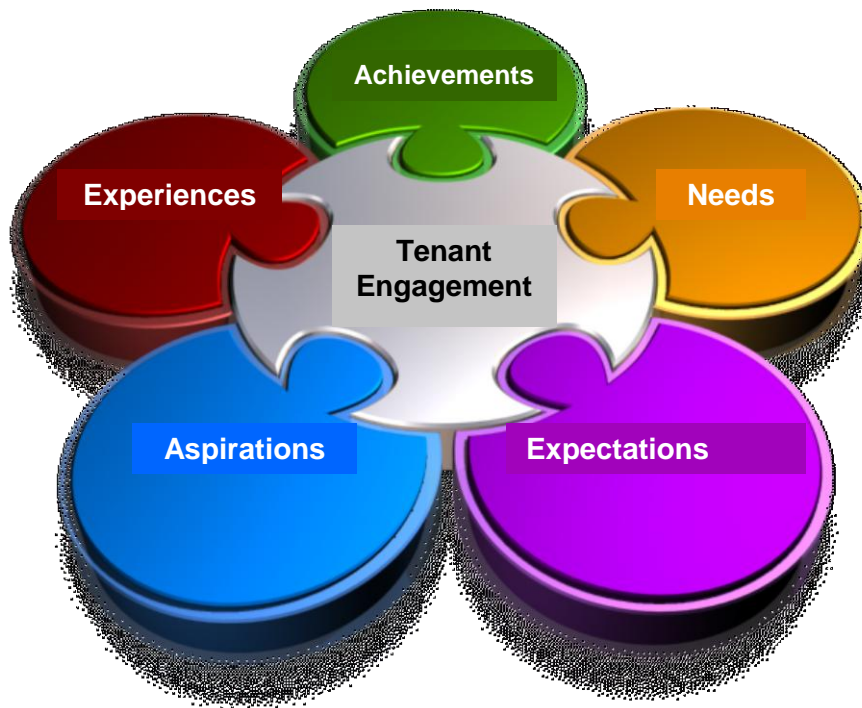
Since 2011 we have been working on a review of our services and during the summer commenced consultation with customers in sheltered and general needs accommodation about proposed changes. With the help of sheltered tenants we are now developing plans for the new service. Tenant representation by way of a sounding board has been in place since the commencement of the review in 2011.

New members are always warmly welcomed at this forum and the meetings offer a chance for residents to be involved in measuring and influencing service delivery. Any new members wishing to be involved should contact the Sheltered Housing Team on **01604 838236** for further details.

### **Equal opportunity Promise**

- We will provide information for tenants in other languages and formats such as audio or large print where tenants need it.
- We will provide information in ways that are easy to understand for tenants with limited reading skills and / or learning difficulties where a need is identified by working with local agencies.
- Hearing loops and signers will be available at meetings
- Meetings will be held at venues that are accessible to all
- We will monitor the profile information of tenants to enable us deliver services that meet their needs.





### Tenant Engagement Benefits

- Ensuring high levels of tenant satisfaction with their homes and neighbourhoods
- Learning from our tenants' experiences as service users to inform the continuous improvement of housing services
- Increased number of tenants involved in engagement activities
- Development of our services so that they become more appropriate to tenants' individual and collective needs
- Ensuring that services are delivered in a more efficient and cost-effective manner.
- Tenants are able to provide scrutiny and challenge to the way in which the Housing Service is delivered within Northampton.
- Ensuring that tenants are involved in making decisions that affect them and the community in which they live
- Enabling Northampton Borough Council staff and tenants to be more aware of each other's perspectives and organisational/financial limitations
- Breaking down misunderstanding between NBC and tenants and also building mutual respect and understanding
- Enhancing tenants skills, knowledge, confidence and quality of life

## 5. Aims and Objectives of the Strategy

### Aims

- To set out our approach to tenant involvement including the reasons why we seek to involve tenants
- To set out ways in which we will enable and encourage tenants to be actively involved and demonstrate that tenants are part of the continuous service review and improvement process
- To be innovative in our approach to involvement to achieve equality and diversity in the services we provide and the opportunities we offer ensuring that all tenants, regardless of particular circumstances or difficulties, have access to the same rights of engagement and consultation
- To ensure that we meet all statutory requirements demonstrating best practice in accordance with government legislation and guidance.

#### **Objective One**

Make tenant and leaseholder engagement an integral part of our business by involving and consulting tenants to shape services to meet their needs

#### **Objective Two**

Ensure that we are fully inclusive and provide opportunities to widen engagement by offering a range of ways that tenants and leaseholders can get involved, at a level and pace that is accessible to all

#### **Objective Three**

To provide and support training and development opportunities to enable all tenants to make a difference

#### **Objective Four**

To maximise accountability and value for money to ensure that tenants have confidence in our services

## 6. Tenant engagement and the bigger picture....

Tenant engagement should not be seen in isolation, but as an integral part of the way we operate as a landlord. This strategy links in with other relevant strategies and national priorities: -

### ◆ **Changing national and local agenda for tenant engagement**

The national agenda for tenant engagement has changed considerably since the introduction of the Tenant Services Authority (TSA) and the Regulatory Framework for Social Housing, with tenant empowerment and involvement being placed at the heart of the Governments drive to ensure the delivery of quality housing services to all who rent from social housing landlords.

The Tenant Services Authority (TSA) was launched on 1 December 2008 and given a directive from central government to adopt co-regulation; this was subsequently defined in the Social Housing Regulatory Framework which introduced six standards in 2010 and then seven standards in 2012 (listed below). The Regulatory Framework emphasises the roles of both the housing landlord and their tenants in working together

to raise standards of housing services, with tenants involved in scrutiny to hold the landlord to account.

STANDARD	INCLUDES
Consumer Standards	
Tenant Involvement & Empowerment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Customer service, choice, complaints</li> <li>▪ Involvement/empowerment</li> <li>▪ Understanding and responding to the diverse needs of tenants</li> </ul>
Home	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Quality of accommodation</li> <li>▪ Repairs and maintenance</li> </ul>
Tenancy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Allocations and mutual exchanges</li> <li>▪ Tenure</li> </ul>
Neighbourhood and community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Neighbourhood management</li> <li>▪ Local area co-operation</li> <li>▪ Anti-social behaviour</li> </ul>
Economic Standards	
Value for money	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Value for money</li> </ul>
Governance and financial viability <i>(Does not apply to Local Authorities)</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Governance/financial viability</li> </ul>
Rent	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Rent</li> </ul>

From April 2012 the responsibility for regulation passed from the TSA to the Homes and Community agency (HCA).

The HCA as the new social housing regulator expects tenants to play a key role in assessing their landlord's performance and holding them to account for any weakness or poor performance in service delivery. It also expects Landlords to take responsibility in ensuring that tenants can and do play a key role in improving performance and services delivered.

This new approach introduced by the HCA means that landlords and tenants regulate performance and service improvement together, with the HCA only intervening when there is evidence of serious failure or detriment by the landlord.

Northampton Borough Council is fully committed to working with all national agencies, to ensure that our tenants can shape, influence and monitor the services we provide.

Furthermore we are committed to ensuring that tenants are kept informed about future national changes that affect the management of their homes and are able to become involved and influence events and opportunities relating to the changing national agenda for tenant engagement.

#### ◆ Northampton Borough Council Corporate Plan

The Tenant Engagement Strategy has strong links and is consistent with the priorities of the current Council Corporate Plan in particular: **Priority 5**-Better Homes for the Future, **Priority 6**-Creating Empowered Communities and **Priority 8**- responding to your needs.

#### ◆ **Northampton Borough Council Housing Strategy and Housing Asset Management Strategy**

These Strategies set out the plan on how housing growth will be delivered through the provision of more affordable homes. They also detail how the Council will invest in its own stock to improve quality and meet the national Decent Homes Standard. Copies of the two documents are available via the council's website [www.northampton.gov.uk](http://www.northampton.gov.uk) and offer greater detail of proposed actions for tackling the housing issues and challenges faced by residents of Northampton over the forthcoming years.

#### ◆ **Northampton Borough Council Community Engagement Strategy**

The Community Engagement Strategy 2009 and associated **Consultation Toolkit** are intended as a guide and support to policy making, encouraging better community engagement, empowerment and increased cohesion.

#### ◆ **Northampton Borough Council Vulnerable Tenant Strategy**

The vulnerable tenants strategy, aims to assist vulnerable tenants sustain their tenancies and live independently in the community. The strategy aims to identify vulnerability at an early stage, and ensures that where required support plans are developed as well as the provision of advice, support and signposting to other agencies where appropriate.

#### ◆ **Customer Excellence Strategy**

The Customer Excellence Strategy (2009-12) sets out how we plan to transform the way in which customers' access our services. The Strategy sets out our plans to work with our customers to understand their needs, offer help at the first point of contact by keeping them informed and providing excellent customer service.

#### ◆ **Safeguarding Children and Vulnerable Adults Policy**

The Customer Engagement team will show due regard to this policy when involving tenants through various engagement activities.

Copies of all of the above strategies are available at [www.Northampton.gov.uk](http://www.Northampton.gov.uk) or see [http://northampton.gov.uk/homepage/327/council\\_policies](http://northampton.gov.uk/homepage/327/council_policies)

### **7. Tenant legal rights to involvement**

Northampton Borough Council as the landlord has statutory duties, obligations and responsibilities that are detailed in every tenancy agreement. Tenants have both statutory rights in law as defined by legislation and guidelines as well as contractual rights outlined in tenancy agreements/leases.

Tenant's rights and responsibilities are acknowledged and fully explained in the tenants Handbook.

There are a number of legal obligations in relation to tenant engagement. Tenants both individually and collectively have a number of legal rights. These include: -

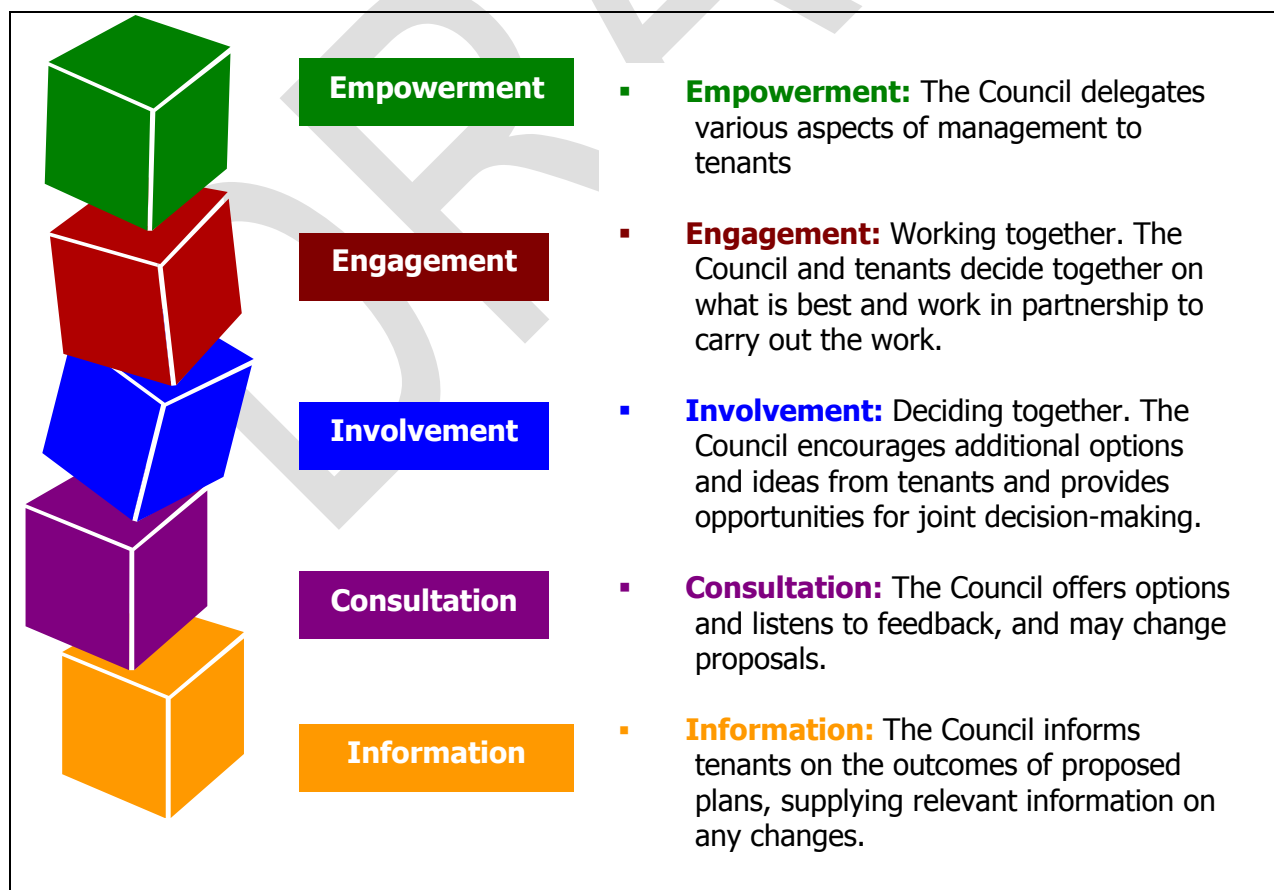
- The Right to be consulted (individual) – Tenants have the right to be consulted individually on housing management changes likely to affect them substantially (Section 105 Housing Act 1985)
- Right to information (individual) – Tenants have the right to information about the terms of their tenancy, the repairing obligations of their landlord, the anti-social behaviour policy, and allocations policy amongst other items.
- Right to manage (collective) – Northampton Borough Councils' tenants have the right to take over the management of their homes providing that they meet certain criteria. To do this they would have to set up a Tenants Management Organisation (TMO), which takes on a package of Housing Management responsibility for an estate after entering into a management agreement with the Landlord.

Whilst some tenants may choose not to get involved, the Council still has a legal duty to keep them informed.

## 8. Ways in which you can get involved

The many differing methods of involvement that Northampton Borough Council use to ensure effective engagement with our tenants is demonstrated by the Ladder of Engagement below

### THE BUILDING BLOCKS OF INVOLVEMENT



It is recognised that people want to give their views or be involved in different ways. As a result a number of ways in which tenants can get involved and participate are offered by Northampton Borough Council.

It is acknowledged that to become involved tenants have to be confident that engagement will be effective and meaningful. To ensure this, the Council will commit that the following standards are adhered to: -

- ◆ Effective communications – with all sides listening and clearly expressing their views
- ◆ Jargon free, accessible information –assigning a reader friendly logo to all tenant reviewed materials
- ◆ Give a clear indication of the time commitment required of residents
- ◆ Action taken on recommendations and feedback provided to those who got involved
- ◆ Well planned meetings, timetabled in advance, avoiding duplication
- ◆ An effective system of support for active tenants

Below are a number of options available to tenants as to how they may get involved. The list is not intended to be an exhaustive one, as new mechanisms will be developed to offer maximum choice and opportunities for people to participate.

CURRENT INVOLVEMENT METHOD	EXPLANATION
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<b>Engagement</b>	
<b>Working together. The Council and tenants decide together on what is best and work in partnership to carry out the work.</b>	
<b>Contract selection, monitoring and steering groups</b>	<p><b>Useful for:</b> Recommending the selection of contractors for specific capital work programmes to council homes and subsequent monitoring of performance and adherence to contract.</p> <p><b>Key features:</b> Enables tenant involvement to be central to the process of contractor selection and performance. Tenants are able to assist officers to ensure that work contracts are managed effectively and deliver effective outcomes to those concerned.</p> <p><b>Commitment level:</b> 2 – 3 hours, once a month</p> <p><b>Examples of its use</b> – Decent Homes Programmes, Gas Contract Monitoring.</p>
<b>Tenant Review Panels / Tenant Auditors</b>	<p><b>Useful for:</b> Tenants and the council work together to improve specific areas of the housing service and also identify areas of good practice.</p> <p><b>Key features:</b> Tenants consider the strategies, policies procedures and performance relating to specific service</p>

	<p>areas and produce a report on their findings to officers making recommendations regarding service improvements. The report covers both written and oral/visual presentation options, to senior housing managers. Each inspection/audit takes approximately 6 - 9 months.</p> <p><b>Commitment level:</b> 2 – 4 hours, per month, plus additional reading and training time to enable familiarisation with service area.</p> <p><b>Example of its use</b> – ASB review, Voids review, Rents review.</p>
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**Involvement**  
**Deciding together. The Council encourages additional options and ideas from tenants and provides opportunities for joint decision-making.**

<p><b>Estate Walkabouts</b></p>	<p><b>Useful for:</b> Meeting with your Housing Officer and representatives from other agencies who work in your area to identify issues that could be improved.</p> <p><b>Key features:</b> Having an influence on what is undertaken to improve the local community. Getting local environmental issues resolved/dealt with.</p> <p><b>Commitment level:</b> 2 – 3 hours, for each walkabout and between 2 – 4 estate walkabouts per year in each area.</p>
<p><b>Mystery Shopping</b></p>	<p><b>Useful for:</b> Inspecting housing to make sure that they meet published standards.</p> <p><b>Key features:</b> An opportunity to help identify improvements to services</p> <p><b>Commitment level:</b> 5 – 7 days per shop per year.</p>

**Consultation**  
**The Council offers options and listens to feedback, and may change proposals.**

<p><b>Area Tenant Panels</b></p>	<p><b>Useful for:</b> Enabling tenants and leaseholders to be consulted on an area basis of housing issues that may affect them. To inform the Housing Directorate of their views and opinions on the quality and nature of the service delivered. Tenants from across the Borough are able to discuss issues, put forward recommendations to housing staff.</p> <p><b>Key features:</b> Quarterly meetings held in the 4 housing management areas and attended by Housing Directorate officers. Residents from across the Borough are able to influence what is important for all residents of Northampton Borough Council</p>
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	<p><b>Commitment level:</b> 2 – 3 hours, quarterly in each area.</p>
<p><b>Customer Feedback</b></p>	<p><b>Useful for:</b> Helps Housing to identify areas for improvement and also how we are performing via our complaints and compliments system.</p> <p><b>Key features:</b> Open and available to any resident at any time.</p> <p><b>Commitment level:</b> according to corporate guidelines. Time commitment and outcomes are dependent on each case.</p>
<p><b>Conferences/Seminars</b></p>	<p><b>Useful for:</b> Gaining knowledge and information on national initiatives. Learning how other geographical areas provide services. Learning how Housing provides services.</p> <p><b>Key features:</b> Allows a wider audience from the total tenant population, to find out more information about housing and housing related issues in Northampton and the rest of the country.</p> <p><b>Commitment level:</b> Will vary, depending on event. Could be up to one day.</p>
<p><b>Focus Groups</b></p>	<p><b>Useful for:</b> Gives tenants the opportunity to give their views on one specific topic.</p> <p><b>Key features:</b> No additional work involved. Meetings should not be any longer than approximately 2 hours.</p> <p><b>Commitment level:</b> Take part as and when held, 2 - 3 hours duration.</p>
<p><b>Open Meetings on “stand-alone” issues</b></p>	<p><b>Useful for:</b> Tenants to put forward their views and opinions to council officers on “stand-alone” issues e.g. spending priorities, choice of kitchen units, bathroom suites etc. Local communities discussing issues, recommendations and improvements with housing representatives</p> <p><b>Key features:</b> Enables tenants to have choice and influence to determine priorities for their home/communities. Depending on the project, it may mean attendance at more than one meeting.</p> <p><b>Commitment level:</b> Take part as and when held, 2 - 3 hours duration.</p>
<p><b>Specialist Forums</b></p>	<p><b>Useful for:</b> Gives tenants from hard to reach groups a collective voice.</p>



	<p><b>Key features:</b> Similar to focus groups but focuses on engaging with tenants who are hard to reach or seldom heard from. For example tenants aged 16 to 25 years, vulnerable or disabled tenants, black and minority ethnic tenants, leaseholders and sheltered housing residents.</p> <p><b>Commitment level:</b> 2 - 3 hours, quarterly</p>
<b>Surveys/Questionnaires</b>	<p><b>Useful for:</b> Providing us with written feedback on particular and/or specialist areas. The information is helpful in redesigning or developing new services.</p> <p><b>Key features:</b> An opportunity for tenants to give their views on our services and performance, and to influence future planning.</p> <p><b>Commitment level:</b> Will vary depending on topic of consultation.</p>

<b>Information</b> <b>The Council tells tenants what they are going to do.</b>	
<b>Information, Handbooks and Leaflets</b>	<p><b>Useful for:</b> Keeping tenants up to date. Easy access to information about services.</p> <p><b>Key features:</b> Tenancy/repairs handbooks are provided to all tenants when they move in. These provide advice on rights, responsibilities and how to report faults. Other leaflets are available from the One Stop Shop or on-line</p> <p><b>Commitment level:</b> Variable</p>
<b>Local Information Notices</b>	<p><b>Useful for:</b> Finding out what is happening in your area. Sometimes these are directly delivered to tenants' homes or more often notices will be posted in the One Stop Shop (Guildhall) and other community outlets (local shops, Community Centres etc.).</p> <p><b>Key features:</b> Information provided could include invitations to events where tenants can discuss plans for their local area / neighbourhood.</p> <p><b>Commitment level:</b> Variable</p>
<b>Newsletters</b>	<p><b>Useful for:</b> Keeping you up to date on what is happening both in Housing and your area and providing information on our performance.</p> <p><b>Key features:</b> Produced 3 times per year and sent to all tenants. Tenants can be involved as part of the Editorial Panel, or they can send articles to the tenant</p>

	<p>representatives in the local areas.</p> <p><b>Commitment level:</b> 4 - 5 hours, quarterly</p>
<p><b>Tenant Sounding Board</b></p>	<p><b>Useful for:</b> Letting us know which ways tenants want to be involved and when they are available to work with us to improve the service</p> <p><b>Key features:</b> Tenants are able to choose how they become involved and with which part of the service</p> <p><b>Commitment level:</b> Will vary dependent on which activities the tenant is involved in.</p>

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## 9. Tenant Engagement Service Standards

The Council has developed three core standards to ensure that tenants that are able can participate and contribute effectively and that they know what to expect from the Council when they get involved.

The standards cover the following areas: -

- Standards for resources/support
- Standards for meetings
- Standards for information

### 9.1. Standards for Resources/Support - what Tenants can expect from the Council to enable full engagement

Practical and financial resources are offered to enable tenants to participate in an effective manner. These resources include financial assistance, training, advice and practical support.

To help tenants who wish to participate/get involved, the following is provided:

- A dedicated Customer Engagement team who work to support and develop tenant engagement at all levels
- A detailed menu of involvement
- Training for tenants
- Tenant Engagement Standards (from national framework)
- Reimbursement of out of pocket expenses for attending housing management meetings and events; this includes transport costs and carer costs. Full details can be obtained from the expenses policy leaflet

Also with a wide range of information relating to housing and other council services all of the above information can be found on the Councils website at [www.northampton.gov.uk](http://www.northampton.gov.uk) or by contacting the Customer Engagement team on 01604-837836 or via email [participation@northampton.gov.uk](mailto:participation@northampton.gov.uk)

#### 9.1.a Tenant Training

An extensive training programme for interested tenants is available that has been designed to equip tenants with the skills and knowledge necessary to engage effectively in all areas of Tenant Engagement. The training programme was developed as a result of a tenant survey and follow up workshop. Examples of the types of training undertaken are listed below

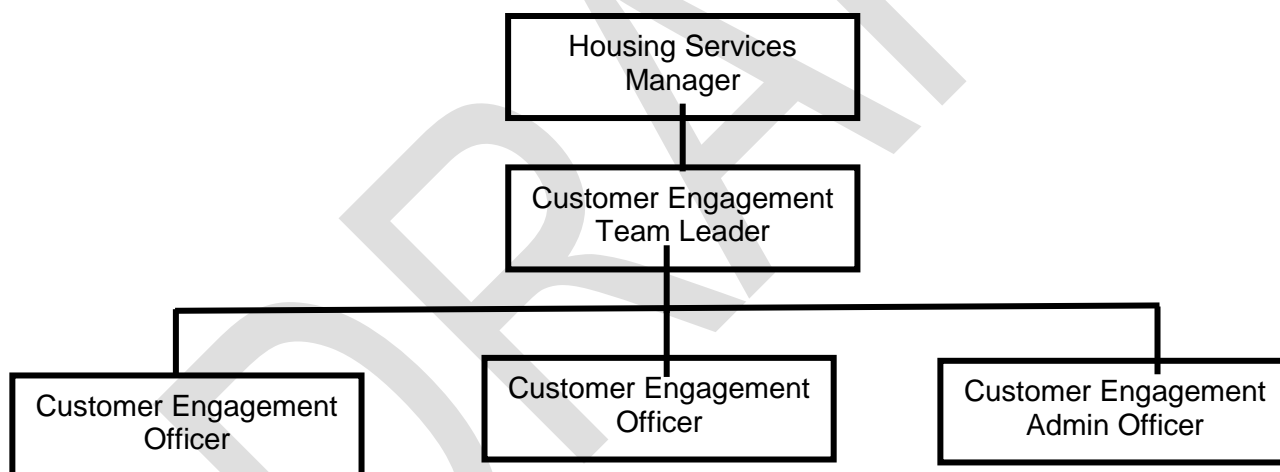
- Antisocial behaviour
- Equality and diversity for tenants
- Allocations and Lettings

- Rents / Housing finance
- Repairs and Maintenance
- How local government works
- Data Protection & Freedom of information
- Health and safety (around the home)
- Healthy Eating (practical session)
- Managing your money
- Helping Hands – life skills training for 16-25 year olds

A tenant-working group will be established to work with the Councils' Customer Engagement team to identify and prioritise future tenant-training needs. This group will also evaluate and review the quality and usefulness of the training previously delivered and makes proposals for future courses. An annual training plan will be published and promoted.

#### 9.1.b. Resources for tenant engagement

There is a specific annual budget identified for tenant engagement projects, which particularly aim to broaden involvement by tenants across the borough. The Council employs a specialist team to support and lead on tenant engagement activities within the Housing Directorate, the structure is detailed below



In addition to this team all officers across the Council have a key role to play in delivering effective engagement, examples of this include housing officers attending and supporting local tenants and residents associations and organising local estate walkabouts.

The Leasehold Officer supports the Leaseholders Forum and works in partnership with leaseholders to improve the service they receive from the Borough Council. The Sheltered Housing Co-ordinators support the Sheltered Tenants Forum.

#### 9.1.c. Reimbursement of out of pocket expenses

Northampton Borough Council will reimburse out of pocket expenses incurred by tenants when attending events and meetings at the Council's request in line with its expenses policy.

The Council may reimburse you for childcare costs, carers' costs and travel costs. Further details on the policy are available on request by contacting the Customer Engagement team on 01604 837836 or email: [participation@northampton.gov.uk](mailto:participation@northampton.gov.uk)

Payments will only be made when incurred with the agreement of the Council's Customer Engagement Team or a nominated officer, and in accordance with published rates (which are subject to change).

### **9.2. Standard for meetings - What tenants can expect when attending engagement meetings held by the Council**

Meetings play an important part in the delivery of an effective engagement framework but it is recognized that meetings are not always well attended and continued efforts are required to encourage high turnout

It is important that when attending a meeting tenants feel that by attending they will not only be listened to but also that there will be visible outcomes.

To be effective, Northampton Borough Council will ensure that meetings:

- ◆ Have clear terms of reference
- ◆ Adhere to a code of conduct
- ◆ Have arrangements for reporting back outcomes and feedback to attendees
- ◆ Have a clear agenda and associated papers supplied a minimum of 7 days before the meeting. We will try as much as possible to avoid tabling papers at the meeting
- ◆ Be held at venues, which, wherever possible, are suitable for disabled people and are held at times which are convenient and accessible.
- ◆ Be effectively chaired, and conducted in a fair and democratic way so that everyone gets a chance to have their say
- ◆ Have arrangements to support attendees with for example out of pocket expenses, and support for tenants with special needs e.g. interpreters.
- ◆ Action points will be communicated when and where appropriate to all interested parties.

### **9.3. Standard for information - What tenants can expect when receiving information from the Council**

Northampton Borough Council aims to provide up-to-date, relevant information at the right time to ensure that tenant engagement is effective.

Information is given for a variety of reasons; to help develop ideas, keep tenants informed about decisions taken, advise people of meetings or to seek views on proposals.

Information is the first level of involvement. We want you to know what is going on, how to obtain further information and how to participate if you are interested.

Tenants housed by Northampton Borough Council have a range of diverse needs with regards to how they would like to receive information. As a result the core standards for information provided by Northampton Borough Council -

- ◆ Will give a consistent message to tenants without unnecessary repetition or duplication
- ◆ Will be in plain language, free from jargon and in an accessible print type
- ◆ Will be made available in other formats on request.

A variety of methods to distribute and obtain information will be used. These will include posters, e-mail, “drop-in” sessions, meetings, home visits and letters.

Information can be provided in different languages and formats for example Braille and audiotape by contacting the Housing Customer Service Helpline **0300 330 7000**.

In order to ensure documents provide information in a tenant friendly way, the Plain English group has been established. Members of this group read through documents and publications to make sure they are:

- ◆ In plain language and easy to read
- ◆ Free from jargon and unnecessary complex words
- ◆ Achieve their purpose
- ◆ Well organised and the layout is appropriate
- ◆ Tailored to a tenant audience

Documents and publications that are looked at and approved by the Tenant plain English group will display a reader friendly logo confirming this (see below).



Northampton Borough Council produces information, which is available to all tenants. Below are the main publications and leaflets we provide and how often tenants should receive them.

<b>Type of publication</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Who receives it</b>
My Home	3 times a year – Summer, Spring & Autumn / Winter editions	All tenants and leaseholders of NBC
Tenants Handbook and Repairs Handbook	Once when you start your tenancy	New tenants
‘What to do if...’ leaflets	On request	Leaflets are available to collect from the One Stop Shop, upon request and on the NBC website
Annual Report	Once a year	All tenants and leaseholders
New tenants sign up pack	Once when you start your tenancy	New tenants
Tenant Engagement Strategy and Agreement	Every 3 years	All tenants and leaseholders

## 10. Monitoring and Reviewing this Strategy

It is important that this strategy is successful and Northampton Borough Council are committed to ensure that the targets set as part of the action plan from this strategy are achieved and the quality of services offered in relation to engagement continues to improve.

The Strategy and action plan will be monitored and reviewed on a regular basis (yearly in the case of the action plan), this will ensure that it not only remains current, relevant and achievable, but also continues to meet the broader aims and objectives of the Council, its tenants and its partners.

Effective Monitoring of the TES 2013-16 will ensure its success. Monitoring will: -

- Identify poor performance and proffer solutions to improving performance
- Receive progress reports and updates on each of the 4 Tenant Engagement objectives
- Highlight emerging trends for future service planning
- Assess the number of policy and process changes / improvements due to the involvement of tenants.
- Assess our performance against each of the actions in the action plan.

**The Tenant Engagement Strategy will be monitored using the following methods:**

- ◆ Quarterly review meetings with the Tenant scrutiny panel with responsibility for engagement
- ◆ Quarterly performance publicised in My Home tenants' magazine
- ◆ Annual performance reported in the Tenants Annual report
- ◆ An annual impact assessment of the strategy
- ◆ Housing services satisfaction survey
- ◆ Housing performance indicators for customer engagement
- ◆ Northampton Borough Council's Local offers to tenants (tenant involvement / empowerment standard)

All Information will be analysed to make sure that the needs, views, opinions and priorities of tenants are taken into account.

## 11. Complaints and Disputes about the TES 2013-16

- ◆ A **complaint** in this strategy is defined as dissatisfaction with the performance standard of service received.
- ◆ A **dispute** is defined as a difference in opinion about how a policy or standard is being implemented and the two parties cannot achieve a resolution which satisfies both parties

The Council have general customer feedback procedures outlined in a document called "Complaints, Compliments and Comments" which is available from Customer Services on 01604-837441 or via email [customerfeedback@northampton.gov.uk](mailto:customerfeedback@northampton.gov.uk) . This



procedure encourages compliments, suggestions and complaints and should be used for all of services provided by the Housing Directorate including this agreement.

The National framework for tenant engagement compacts recommends that complaints should be dealt with at the lowest possible level. If individual tenants feel that the service received doesn't meet the standards outlined in this strategy e.g. insufficient notice for meetings, then in the first instance they should speak to the department or section responsible. If they don't receive a satisfactory response then they should write to the Customer Engagement Team at Northampton Borough Council or email: [participation@northampton.gov.uk](mailto:participation@northampton.gov.uk). Any such complaints will be investigated and dealt with under the complaints policy, which can be viewed or accessed via the council's website [www.northampton.gov.uk](http://www.northampton.gov.uk) in the feedback section.

The Localism Act 2011 proposes changes to complaint handling from April 2013; the change is in the introduction of Democratic Filters or Designated Persons. In simple terms this means that once the Northampton Borough Council corporate complaints system is exhausted rather than the next step being referral to the Ombudsman there would be a newly introduced level i.e. the "Designated Person" whereby a complainant would have to refer their complaint to a designated person before it could be referred to the Ombudsman. This designated person could be a Member of Parliament (an MP), a Local Councillor or a designated tenant panel.

The purpose of the designated person is to strengthen:

1. The local democratic process and accountability. The proposals to introduce a democratic filter are designed to put local people in greater control of driving up standards of social housing management and resolving most failings.
2. The knowledge of local representatives' in resolving housing complaints. The proposals give a greater role for locally elected representatives to resolve housing problems in their area.
3. The speed of resolution of disputes at the local level. Local representatives are expected to understand local issues and to be well placed to work with landlords to resolve complaints more quickly by avoiding the need to go to the Ombudsman.

The proposed scrutiny system once fully developed is sufficiently flexible to accommodate the tenant panel aspect of the Democratic filter and it is proposed that the overarching scrutiny panel will undertake the role.

## **12. Tenant Engagement – the future**

In order to meet the identified aims and objectives of this strategy an annual action plan will be produced. Tenant engagement is a fast moving area for national and local policy and as such this annual action plan will be produced and published on the Engagement section of Northampton Borough Council's website.

The action plan will outline all of the key actions that are necessary to ensure that the Council is fully compliant with legal, regulatory and best practice requirements in relation to tenant engagement and ensures that tenant engagement remains high profile and a key driver for its current improvement journey.



It will capture in specific detail how the Council aims to be more inclusive, involving more tenants, shape services around tenant's priorities and identified need, achieve local offers, introduce scrutiny /performance arrangements and undertake a range of additional innovative measures to ensure the delivery of the four objectives of this agreement.

Aligned to the achievement of all of the actions is the embedding of an engagement culture throughout the Council, whereby engagement is considered a key part of every officer's daily routine. This will ensure that we are successful in delivering effective outcomes and enabling more opportunities and choice for tenants to participate in a meaningful way.

The publication of the regulatory framework for social housing places a clear expectation on NBC that we have a system of robust tenant scrutiny in place, which provides a system of customer challenge and genuine tenant input in the development and improvement of Housing Services at Northampton.

The concept of resident-led self-regulation and scrutiny has been developed with the aim of giving tenants more influence over the priorities and performance of their landlord an approach that this agreement fully supports and by its design allows it to be delivered.

Put simply this is an approach where residents' priorities, views and engagement with relevant processes are at the heart of Northampton Borough Council frameworks for directing, accounting for, monitoring, assessing and modifying their own behaviour and performance.

If we are to deliver a structure that not only supports this method of engagement and additionally meets and exceeds the Government guidelines in relation to Tenant led self-regulation, then a system of effective Tenant Scrutiny panels are central to achieving this.

Once established effective Tenant Scrutiny will result in internal processes at NBC that not only support challenges of performance but also give our tenants the power to challenge service delivery but also drive change; done effectively this will in turn result in improved processes and better quality housing services being delivered to NBC customers.

In order to ensure effective tenant scrutiny at Northampton Borough Council we have to establish arrangements that not only build on the good work produced in previous years by tenant engagement but also deliver a structure that best suits our local situation.

To achieve this we have taken into account good practice models available nationally but the newness of the Scrutiny panel initiative means that at present it is still in an emerging stage and there are no hard and fast rules regarding its introduction and as a result we will be able to develop a structure that fits the requirements of NBC rather than making our service delivery model meet a national or regional framework / model. The result of this will be that the final model is most effective for Northampton and best meets and serves the needs of its tenants.

When developing the Northampton model of tenant scrutiny there are a number of key steps that have to be fully considered these are:

- Building in self-determination – For scrutiny to be fully effective then tenants have to lead on scrutiny, with the panel being able to set their own priorities. They will achieve this by looking at areas they consider most important, asking for and receiving information, and reporting findings themselves. The biggest change likely to arise from this element is that tenants who have previously been passive become proactive when undertaking a scrutiny role as they will be expected to present findings and make recommendations.
- Getting 'buy in' from members, staff and tenants – scrutiny will only work well if tenants not only want it, but equally are able to see the benefit of becoming involved both of which will be supported by senior management/elected member's respecting and demonstrating respect for and valuing the scrutiny role performed by tenants.
- Making sure recruitment and the composition of the scrutiny group suit the circumstances faced by NBC – The success of the model is largely based on establishing panels that work effectively and command confidence. To deliver this the recruitment processes and subsequent involvement levels of the tenants involved will make or break the success of Scrutiny. If the panel is to be fully successful it needs to be representative of the wider tenant body.
- Identification of the skill sets required by tenants and supporting this with targeted quality training – good scrutiny requires particular skills and knowledge; this includes things such as the ability to phrase scrutiny questions and obtain answers. In order to fully develop this aspect of the scrutiny approach it will be necessary to undertake a full skills audit of interested tenants and follow this up with appropriate training, this will in turn ensure that the panel can be effective.
- Be clear on the structures and powers from the outset – clarity on how things link together, what can and cannot be achieved, and where to obtain particular responses to enquiries can determine the effectiveness of scrutiny.

If scrutiny is to deliver the maximum benefit then it needs to become an embedded part of the culture at NBC and the following will be the key characteristics of genuine tenant led scrutiny

- **Independence** from other governance and management structures.
- **Formality** in operation.
- **Power** for residents to challenge and effect change.

**Independence** means that the people who control the scrutiny and intervention of resident-led self-regulation are not the same people who manage the Housing Service. This allows for another perspective from management to complement or challenge views held and scrutiny will not be influenced by those with a preferred direction for the Service.

**Formality** gives confidence and legitimacy to the scrutiny role. It also gives residents confidence that they are justified in asking for information and the activities will be taken into account. Formality can and should be achieved by prescribing structures, remit and roles at the outset. The introduction of a scrutiny panel takes this particular area of engagement away from the informal consultation traditionally employed at Northampton in regards to engagement to a more formal scrutiny role.

**Power** is important in making scrutiny an effective partnership of equals and those managing the housing service. Without power scrutiny activities can be simply a consultative process, which the landlord does not have to take any notice of and will quickly become ineffective and lose the support of tenants.

### **13. Proposed engagement model for scrutiny**

The intention of the new structure proposed is to be an inclusive one, giving weight to tenants views assessments and priorities whilst ensuring that all who wish to be involved are accommodated at one or more of the different levels within the structure and that way the potentially divisive issue of elections is avoided and tenants self-select the role they feel most comfortable operating at.

An advantage of this approach is that it would counter, to some effect; tenant burnout by spreading the load amongst more tenants and also give a larger pool of committed and trained tenants and avoid domination by a small number of tenants.

The new structure will see the establishment of up to 5 scrutiny panels each of which would cover a specific area of service delivery. The exact number of panels will be confirmed once levels of interest are established. The structure is flexible enough to allow additional panels to be established or disbanded as and when required.

Once established the panel members would elect a chair and these chairs would then become the overarching scrutiny board/group with the additional function of acting as the tenant aspect of the democratic filter (designated person role) once this is established at NBC as part of the localism act.

It is proposed that the panels will cover areas such as

- HOME- Repairs and Maintenance, quality of accommodation including the Decent Homes Programme and Voids
- SOLUTIONS- CBL, Homelessness service and Gateway
- NEIGHBOURHOOD- Estate and communal areas, ASB, Cleaning and caretaking
- INVOLVEMENT AND EMPOWERMENT- Customer service, equality and diversity
- STRATEGY- VFM and target setting

The above panels would be presented with a work plan by the overarching board and meet as and when required but it is anticipated this will be a minimum of once every two months. Each of these areas has been identified in a recent 2012 summer survey on tenants' priorities.

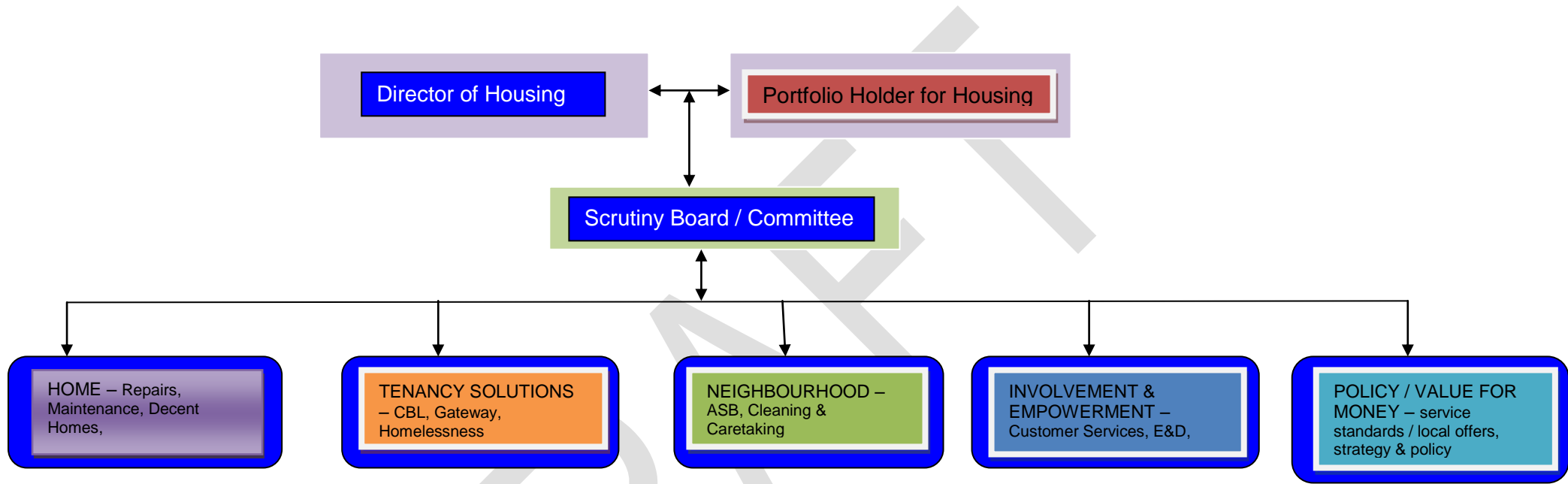
The overarching scrutiny board comprising of tenant chairs would meet a minimum of 4 times a year with two of these being attended by the cabinet member for Housing and the Director, one of these meetings would be the presentation of an annual report highlighting the work and recommendations of the various scrutiny panels for the preceding year and the second would be concerned with the proposed work plan for the upcoming year.

The annual work programme will be driven in the main although not exclusively by the following areas

- Development of tenant centred local offers
- Use of performance indicators
- Focus on issues that deliver outcomes for tenants
- Address areas of weakness identified in tenant satisfaction surveys
- Taking account of diversity and equality issues relating to tenant profile
- Value for money of service provided
- Develop a regular programme of Tenant Audits, mystery shopping etc

A schematic of the proposed scrutiny structure is shown overleaf

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In order for the scrutiny function to operate successfully a long term look at service planning and delivery is needed, so as to ensure that services continue to reflect tenant's priorities and also deliver value for money. It may be necessary for extensive training to be offered to panel members in order that this aspect of tenant scrutiny can be delivered effectively.

The panels will all share a common purpose which is to improve the service delivered by Northampton Borough Council and received by our tenants, whilst remaining focussed on tenant centred outcomes.

Tenants on the panels may see things from a different perspective and not necessarily from the same viewpoint as officers and this should be seen as a positive of the scrutiny function, all conclusions of the panels will be based firmly on evidence rather than opinion or hearsay, but equally there needs to be a firm commitment that the findings of the panel are not only considered by the decision makers (senior officers and councillors) in the process but also that a response is given to the presented findings.

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