

HALTON HOUSING TRUST

CUSTOMER INVOLVEMENT POLICY

Date due for Review :

Introduction

Halton Housing Trust (the Trust) is committed to enabling customers to become directly involved in the management of their homes, and in determining the existing and future shape of services they receive. The Trust recognises that in many of the areas in which it works a substantial proportion of the housing stock has been sold under the Right to Buy. Therefore to ensure it builds and maintains sustainable communities the Trust recognises the importance of involving all those people who live in the areas in which it works in the services that affect the quality of their lives and the built environment. Where specific reference is made to 'tenants' this refers to all occupiers of the Trust's homes including assured and starter tenants, users of supported housing and leaseholders.

The Trust recognises that not all customers will wish to be involved in the same way. Some customers will wish to be informed only, others will wish to be consulted, whilst others will want to be actively involved in the decision making process. The Trust respects all of these views and it will be for individual and groups of customers to determine their own level and preferred mechanism of involvement.

There are some decisions that will need to be determined by tenants of the Trust, especially where these relate to resource decisions which are to be funded from rental income. Local structures will ensure these principles are safeguarded whilst also benefiting from the input and views of the wider body of residents.

The Trust wants to build on the positive relationship developed between Halton Borough Council and its customers over time and will look to work closely with customers to develop a new Participation Agreement. The Trust is also committed to working with customers to ensure any involvement framework put in place conforms to Best Value principles and continuously improves. Furthermore that it also meets the requirements of the Housing Corporation Regulatory Code and the expectations as set out within the Audit Commission's Housing Key Lines Of Enquiries (KLOEs) across all service areas.

This Customer Involvement Policy sits within the context of the wider Customer Involvement Strategy for the Trust. This document sets out what the Trust seeks to achieve from the commitment and substantial investment into its community development arrangements and how this is to be achieved and supported.

Policy Statement

The Trust is committed to ensuring that all customers will have the opportunity to be involved both on a formal or informal basis, as individuals or as members of groups, at a level they feel comfortable with and at a pace that they determine.

The Trust believes that customer involvement is the primary tool to enhance and develop its efficiency and effectiveness. This can be achieved in the following ways;

- local involvement in decision making ;
- accountability at local level including a performance monitoring role;
- built in customer perspective for the service ;
- determining existing and future service quality and standards;
- strong community links and relationships.

The Trust is keen to build relationships with Halton Borough Council, other community stakeholders and a range of voluntary groups to pursue and achieve common goals. This policy is in line with the requirements of the Housing Corporation's Regulatory Code. This will provide a clear commitment from the Trust to take into account customers' views prior to making decisions across all aspects of service delivery, and to ensure that the outcomes from customer involvement are reported back to all customers.

The way in which the policy will be implemented has two separate dimensions:-

1. Customer Involvement and Influence over Decision Making
2. Customer Consultation and Information

1. Customer Involvement and Influence over Decision Making

The Trust will provide its services in line with the Housing Corporation's Regulatory Code and Guidance and the service standards as set out within the Audit Commission's Housing KLOEs across all service areas.

Although there is no universal model of involvement there will be a range of opportunities for customers to become involved, and have a real say in the management of their homes and the housing service.

These will include:-

- Open Membership to the Trust – all tenants would have the opportunity to become Members of the Trust. As such, they would be

able to attend the Trust's Annual General Meeting, receive detailed annual performance and financial reports, and take part in the appointment of Independent Board Members. In addition, residents would have the opportunity to apply to become Independent Members of the Trust. Details and application forms regarding membership would be available from the Company Secretary.

- Tenant customers on the Trust's Board of Management – one third of the seats on the Trust's Board will be reserved for tenants, and they will have exactly the same rights and responsibilities, including voting rights, as the other board members.
- Halton Housing Community Voice – the Trust will establish at least two area boards (to be called Halton Housing Community Voice) who will meet to consider the delivery of service by the Trust at a local level. The area boards would be made up of representatives from local tenants associations, street representatives and members of the Trust's Board of Management, and also the wider body of residents in the area. They will have a budget available to them to address local environmental issues. They will be to influence/determine wider budgetary and expenditure issues for the area in which they live. They will also have an active role in performance management and ensuring that the Trust is locally accountable for the quality and standard of services it delivers in each area.
- Customer Involvement Compact – the Trust is committed to the principles and standards for customer involvement and seeks to build upon the baseline position previously negotiated between tenants and Halton Borough Council. These principles and standards will provide the foundation for the development of a new Customer Involvement Compact and wider Customer Involvement Strategy between the Trust and its customers.
- Local Compacts and the Area Housing Teams – the Trust views the Area Housing Teams as a primary focus for participation at a local level and for ensuring ownership of the Customer Involvement Strategy throughout the organisation. This will also be reflected in the core competencies and targets for staff. Examples will include regular and timetabled estate walkabouts, the development of local compacts, management of local improvement schemes and general liaison between customers and staff. Area Team staff will respond to reasonable requests for information or assistance from customer groups, including attendance at meetings where required. Any local compact will reflect the local priorities and needs of customers in their particular area. They will have been drawn up by local customers, Area Team staff and representatives from other agencies as appropriate.

The Trust will support customer involvement by;

- providing a designated Customer Involvement Manager to support and sustain customer involvement;
- providing financial support to a recognised Customers Federation that is established to support the needs of the Trust's customers;

- providing start up and development grants to customers' groups;
- helping groups identify opportunities and apply for independent funding;
- exploring options to provide additional funding for individual groups;
- developing an extensive training programme for customer representatives across all service areas;
- identifying and providing training for customer representatives, Board Members and Trust staff, to acquire the skills and knowledge which will allow them to work together effectively, and ensure effective involvement in decision making and service improvement;
- promoting innovative approaches to involvement and exploring the development of other ways to widen the inclusion of customers in the management of the business.

2. Customer Consultation and Information

The Trust will consult with its customers in accordance with the Housing Corporation's Regulatory Code – in particular, Section 2.5 It will also reflect the expectations as set out within the Audit Commission's Housing KLOEs across all service areas.

Consultation

The Trust will ensure that customers are provided with sufficient information to understand any proposals it puts forward. The Trust will consult and involve customers on all matters of housing policy and practice including:-

- business planning ;
- developing the housing strategy ;
- investment priorities ;
- developing and achieving Best Value services ;
- setting and monitoring service standards and performance targets ;
- reviews of services and performance and decisions about remedial action ;
- regeneration, redevelopment and repairs schemes ;
- environmental works ;
- tenancy conditions ;
- housing management services ;
- rent levels and service charges (even where there is no legal requirement to do so) ;
- community safety ;
- equality and diversity issues ;
- arrangements for the publication and provision of customer information ;
- complaints procedures.

This will be achieved by using a variety of means including (but not restricted to) meetings, information sheets, training events and newsletters. The Trust

will be responsible for making the arrangements for all meetings it sponsors including the booking of suitable venues and notification/publicity.

The Trust will continue to support the creation of independent customer groups, which has always been seen in the past as one of the building blocks of effective consultation.

While continuing to support these formal groups, the Trust will also look to continue to develop a more flexible consultation and involvement framework, which includes:-

- A Customers Panel – a group of individual customers who are consulted a number of times per year about the housing service and/or proposed changes to policy. This will be done by a combination of postal and telephone surveys.
- Street Representatives – a spokesperson nominated to represent up to 30 tenants, with a mandate to provide information and put forward views on housing policy issues.
- Consultative Forums – the provision of public meetings where groups of customers from a particular area/estate will meet with Trust staff, usually on a quarterly basis, to work together to resolve local problems. This gives customers a forum for consultation/participation without the need to create a formal tenants' association.
- Annual Customers Conference – will be organised to run in conjunction with the Trust's Annual General Meeting, and would be used as a vehicle to launch the Trust's Annual Report.
- Published estate walkabouts – using a published timetable agreed with local residents in advance the Trust together with a range of other local agencies will undertake estate walkabouts to identify problems and increase accessibility to customers. The outcomes and actions taken as a result of these walkabouts will be published through a variety of fora and progress against identified actions monitored to ensure delivery and accountability.

Information

All customers will receive written information in the form of letters, reports, brochures, information pamphlets, leaflets and newsletters. In addition all new tenants will receive an information pack about services and opportunities for participation. A tenant handbook is provided to all tenants. A separate publication will be made available for leaseholders. All information will be available in a variety of formats to ensure that it is:-

- relevant and at the level of detail appropriate for the customers' needs ;
- in a readable typeface and print size ;
- in an attractive design and format, and inviting to read ;
- in clear, concise, plain language ;
- provided in translation where appropriate ;

- provided in formats suitable for customers with specific communication needs, e.g. large print, Braille, audio-tape, picture format for people with learning disabilities, electronic.

In all of its consultation with customers the Trust will :-

- allow adequate time for customers to consider proposals and respond;
- take account of the variety of views and feedback the reasons for decisions reached;
- provide customers with the outcomes from consultation processes in a format that is clearly understood;
- work in partnership with the local community including other local and statutory agencies.

Responsibility

The Deputy Chief Executive will be responsible for the effective implementation of this policy.

The Deputy Chief Executive will also be responsible for ensuring that all staff involved its implementation are aware of and trained in this policy and associated procedures. These will also form part of the core competencies for staff and a basis for core performance targets.

Review

The Trust will review the effectiveness and detail of this policy annually by consulting with its customers. This will include reference to Halton Housing Community Voice.

Associated Documents

Customer Involvement Strategy
Leasehold Consultation Policy
Equality and Diversity Policies
Customer Care Policy
Tenants' Handbook