



Tenant Participation Strategy

2017-2020

**Approved December 2016
Review date 2020**

TENANT PARTICIPATION STRATEGY 2017-2020

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1. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

This strategy builds on Link's achievements in the previous strategy 2014-2016. Following a review this strategy identifies tenants' and Link's priorities for tenant participation from 2017-2020. This document refers to 'Link' or 'Link Housing Association' (LHA) for simplicity. Link Group Ltd. is the Registered Social Landlord which owns the house and Link Housing Association is appointed by Link Group Ltd. to manage the tenancy on behalf of Link Group Ltd. For more information on the functions and roles of Link Housing Association and Link Group Ltd. see www.linkhousing.co.uk.

In 2015-2016 tenant satisfaction with the opportunities to participate was 98% and Link will work to sustain this excellent level of performance.

Tenant participation is about sharing knowledge, responsibility and decision-making to improve services. Tenant participation is about tenants providing feedback to influence tenant services such as repairs, neighbourhoods, rent levels, value for money of rent and services, allocations and issues related to tenancy and neighbourhood management.

Successful tenant participation delivers benefits for staff, landlord and tenants by creating a culture of trust, respect and partnership. Benefits include less complaints, higher tenant and staff satisfaction and shared accountability for making decisions about limited resources. Tenants' knowledge, feedback and experiences of services are valuable tools to learn how to improve. Link wishes tenants to be able to provide this knowledge and experience without any barriers and participate in a way that suits them.

The language used is important to understand the type and scope of participation. Staff and tenants should share understanding of the language and types of participation. Using technical and professional language can often be a barrier to tenant participation and Link will continually drive this message with staff to ensure that plain language is used and tenants are supported to understand professional terminology in consultation activities.

Link defines tenant participation within this strategy in the following ways;

- **Communication** – providing information in the tenant newsletter, handbook, website, Facebook and Twitter. Tenant participation can help improve ways to make it easier for tenants to obtain information they need.
- **Consultation and engagement** – when tenants are invited to participate in service or policy reviews, set service standards, surveys or attend focus groups and given options to make changes to service or decisions. This feedback should influence Link's decisions and the impact of consultation shown in the Link Listening section of the newsletter.
- **Scrutiny and tenant-led participation**– when tenants participate in activities to assess Link's performance. Tenants set the agenda independently, carry out inspections and make recommendations for improvement. This activity is formal and linked to governance of the organisation and reports regularly to the Board. Other examples include independent Registered Tenant Organisations which set their own agendas and timescales for activities.
- **Governance** – tenants on the Link Housing Association and Link Group Ltd. boards contributing to decisions about the strategic direction and monitoring of Link's performance. Tenant scrutiny is independent of governance but it is linked to

governance as a way to challenge decisions and scrutinise performance monitoring to ensure effective accountability.

- **Review** – Link will monitor this strategy annually to ensure it can adapt with the Business Plan and to respond to tenants’ priorities and needs.

2. LINK’S VALUES

Link’s values underpin all its activities, working practices and strategies, including tenant participation. The values help create a collaborative working culture for staff and tenants to work together.

- **Responsibility** – We all take responsibility for our actions.
- **Empathy** – We work hard to understand how people feel as individuals and treat them with dignity.
- **Social Impact** – We strive to ensure there is a positive social impact from our activities and work with others who share these aims.
- **Participate** – We are proactive in providing opportunities for people to engage with us and help improve our services.
- **Equality** – We are all equal and different and we aim to provide inclusive environments for work and for living.
- **Challenge** – We challenge ourselves and others towards excellence and innovation in all we do.
- **Transparency** – We are open and honest about what we do and how we do it.

3. AIMS

The Tenant Participation Strategy aims to;

- Provide opportunities for tenants to influence services, neighbourhoods and decision-making.
- Comply with tenant participation and consultation statutory requirements set out in the Housing (Scotland) Act 2001, the Housing (Scotland) Act 2010 and Housing (Scotland) Act 2014.
- Respond to tenant priorities for participation topics (services and issues tenants are most interested in) and methods (ways to get involved).
- Work with Link Housing Association, Link Group and Link Property staff who deliver services to tenants, to improve staff involvement and increase their responsibilities for supporting, implementing and monitoring tenant participation.
- Help Link achieve excellent performance towards the outcomes set out in the Scottish Social Housing Charter and support independent tenant scrutiny of Link’s performance.
- Consult tenants on locally agreed targets and definitions required by the Annual return on the Charter.
- Involve tenants in shaping business plan priorities. This includes Link Housing’s customer service improvement priorities; customer service accreditation; welfare reform, sheltered housing redesign; mobile working/developing digital self service and the review of allocations and arrears processes. This work is being done by adopting a ‘systems thinking’ approach to service improvement which involves putting customers’ experiences at the forefront of system and process reviews, therefore customer feedback should be part of this.

4. SCOPE

The scope of this strategy is to focus on tenants managed by Link Housing Association which is over 6300 tenants in 22 local authority areas. It does not include the engagement of owners or other customer groups such as mid market tenants, Private Sector Leasing tenants or tenants of other housing associations within the Link Group. Link tenants in West Highland, Horizon and Larkfield Housing Associations are not included within the scope as these tenants are offered opportunities to participate within the respective organisations responsible for providing the local housing management service.

Link will work in partnership, where relevant, with these other customer groups, for example, Registered Tenant Organisations which choose to involve tenants and owners or hosting joint tenant events and conferences with other Link subsidiaries.

Tenants and staff consultation revealed a strong consensus to keep this as a 'tenant participation strategy' rather than change the language to 'customer participation strategy'. Tenants stated they are happy to be called 'customers' and refer to examples such as 'customer service' as positive language but do not want to lose the positive connotations which they feel comes with tenant participation such as tenancy rights.

A review of policies due for renewal has been carried out and relevant policies will be noted in the action plan. Any policy affecting tenants has the potential to relate to this strategy, however, with limited resources priority has been given to the most relevant ones for this strategy duration.

5. LEGAL CONTEXT

Housing (Scotland) Act 2001

Tenants have a legal right to participate as set out in the Housing (Scotland) Act 2001. Link must;

- Consult affected tenants on any proposed increases in rent or other charges payable under the tenancy, to have regard to their views and to provide four weeks' notice of increases.
- Publish a Tenant Participation Strategy setting out resources for participation.
- Publish a list of Registered Tenant Organisations (RTOs);
- Notify tenants and RTO's of any proposals that would significantly affect tenants, explaining the likely effect, to give them reasonable timescales to respond and to have regard to the views of tenants or other organisations responding to the consultation. This includes proposals relating to policy on housing management, repairs, maintenance, standards of service, the tenant participation strategy and any stock transfer resulting in a change of landlord.

Housing (Scotland) Act 2010

The Housing (Scotland) Act 2010 set out the legislation to establish a Scottish Social Housing Charter and independent Scottish Housing Regulator (SHR). This put tenant participation back on the national agenda and the expectation for an increased scrutiny role for tenants. The SHR placed emphasis on this type of tenant participation as a regulatory requirement.

The Charter sets out the outcomes (results) landlords should achieve for tenants and other customers. This information is submitted to the SHR every year in March and published to tenants in August. Information is compared and national average performance is published

so tenants can compare landlord performance. Tenant satisfaction is measured against 16 outcomes set out in the Scottish Social Housing Charter. 14 outcomes are relevant to Link. In particular the tenant participation strategy helps deliver the following national outcomes;

- **Equalities:** 'Every tenant and other customers have their individual needs recognised, are treated fairly and with respect, and receives fair access to housing and housing services.'
- **Communication:** 'Tenants and other customers find it easy to communicate with their landlord and get the information they need about their landlord, how and why it makes decisions and the services it provides.'
- **Participation:** 'Tenants and other customers find it easy to participate and influence their landlords' decisions at a level they feel comfortable with.'

For more information on the Charter visit the website - <http://housingcharter.scotland.gov.uk/>.

For more information on the SHR - <https://www.scottishhousingregulator.gov.uk/>

Housing (Scotland) Act 2014

The Housing (Scotland) Act 2014 brought in further statutory consultation requirements. This includes changes to group structures and mergers, allocations and anti social behaviour statutory instruments. Link is required to consult and inform tenants about a range of issues relating to this, guidance and training packs will be published by Scottish Government soon. Link will produce a consultation plan in 2017 to implement the new duties which will sit within the Tenant Participation Strategy Action Plan.

The Community Empowerment Act 2015

The Community Empowerment Act sets out statutory obligations for public bodies (e.g. NHS, Councils, Police) to respond to community group and service users requests for changes to services. It also gives communities the right to land and asset ownership and to have greater influence or control over things that matter to them. Link will use National Standards for Community Engagement which is deemed to be good-practice principles designed to support and inform the process of community engagement, and improve what happens as a result. Tenants' groups could potentially exercise these rights, for example, to apply for community asset ownership.

Tenant Participation Guidance 2017

The Scottish Government is currently revising its tenant participation guidance and plans to publish this in 2017. This guidance will collate all the statutory consultation responsibilities into one document. Link will ensure it trains staff, informs tenants and implements all related statutory consultation. When the guidance is available consultation activities will be incorporated into the Tenant Participation Action Plan.

6. APPROACH AND METHOD

Link developed this strategy in partnership with tenants, frontline staff, managers and Board. The previous strategy was reviewed to assess progress, strengths and weaknesses, and to develop a revised set of aims, outcomes and resources to reflect both tenants' and business priorities for tenant participation.

Surveys and focus groups with staff, tenants' groups and individual tenants were used as consultation methods. Discussions were held at the LHA business planning session, LHA managers' strategy day and LHA Board strategy day.

Link is in the process of renewing the Tenant Participation Advisory Service (TPAS) accreditation in conjunction with the strategy review. This is an in-depth independent assessment against 10 standards for effective tenant participation. A self assessment with documentary evidence will be submitted in December 2016 of how Link's tenant participation practice meets these standards. TPAS facilitated staff and tenant focus groups to gather evidence. It will make its assessment in January 2017 and if successful will award accreditation from 2017-2020. Awards are Bronze, Silver or Gold. TPAS will make recommendations which will be included in the Tenant Participation Strategy Action Plan.

An action plan will be developed once the TPAS accreditation recommendations are made in January.

Consultation process and feedback standards

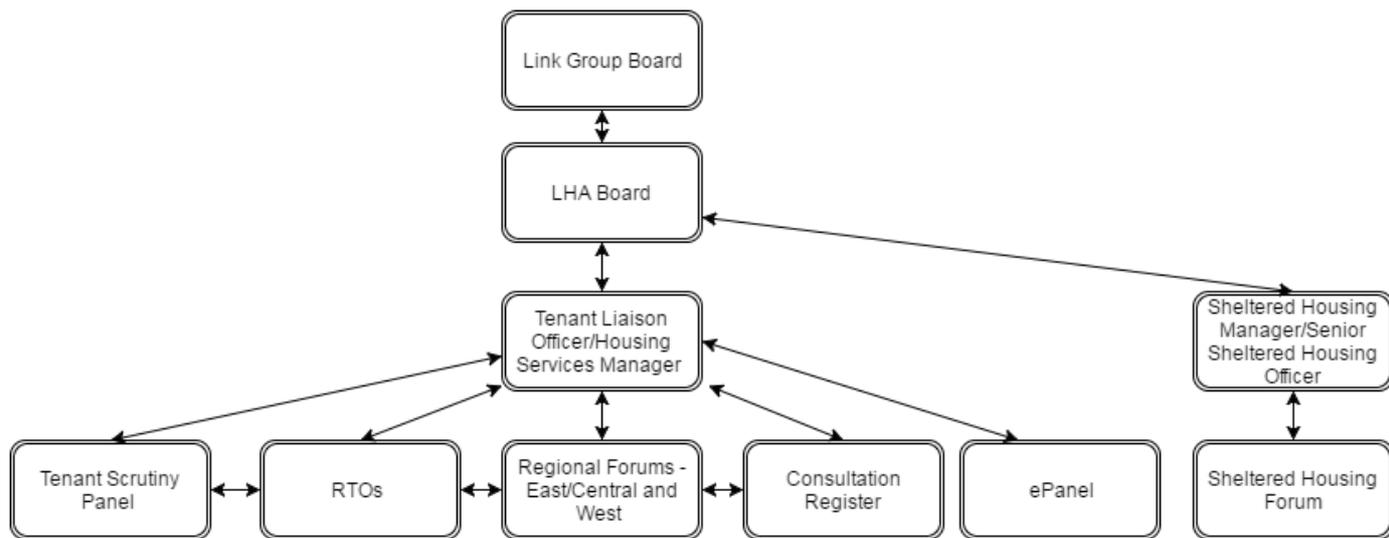
Link acknowledges it needs to improve feedback timescales and the importance of this to value and sustain tenant participation. Discussion with tenants and staff resulted in keeping the current feedback standard of no later than 6 weeks after participation.

Tenants recognised feedback timescales can be different for different types of participation. For example, policy and strategy consultation feedback is in two stages. Firstly the consultation report which details tenants' views and then final feedback to inform tenants of the outcome of decisions after Board meetings. Consultation responses are reported to the relevant board and recommendations made. The Boards consider consultation responses and discuss the implications for Link and its tenants. The Boards are the decision-maker to approve policies and strategies relevant to Link tenants. The complete process takes longer than six weeks but initial feedback should be within 6 weeks.

Feedback to tenants who participate in neighbourhood inspections or Registered Tenant Organisations should be quicker and a four week feedback standard has been set for this type of activity. The Tenant Scrutiny Panel can also request feedback timescales relevant to its activities which are longer or shorter than 6 weeks. The feedback standard will be monitored in the action plan.

Attached is a consultation process diagram which demonstrates the steps for effective consultation including feedback.

Tenant participation structure



7. SUPPORTING AND RESOURCING TENANT PARTICIPATION

Link aims for barrier free participation, meaning it wants to provide activities which are easy to access, and will provide support for all tenants who want to get involved in a way that suits them. Tenants told us that location and travel to meetings is the biggest barrier. Link is committed in this strategy to increasing local opportunities to get involved. Link's four regional housing teams will work with tenant participation staff to prioritise areas for local tenant participation. Link will advertise all opportunities in the tenant newsletter and in the 'Get Involved' section of the website. Link is always looking for new people to become involved and wants to challenge the perception that tenant participation is only for a select few. Housing officers and other frontline staff will promote and encourage tenants to become involved. Link spends £10 per tenant on tenant participation activities compared to a national average of £9.75 (Scotland's Housing Network). Considering the geographical spread of Link stock spend is approximately average compared to what other housing association peers spend.

Support and resources in the tenant participation budget cover;

- Travel expenses
- If a meeting is over lunchtime or an evening meeting we will provide catering
- Childcare costs
- Study visits to see what other housing associations do to improve
- Costs of training or qualifications
- Grants for tenants' groups
- Tenant scrutiny activities
- Surveys
- Meeting venue and event costs
- Costs of tenants attending conferences such as TPAS, CIH or TIS annual conferences.
- Incentive vouchers or competitions to encourage participation for some activities such as the Link Tour or tenant conference.
- Dedicated Tenant Liaison Officer and part time Tenant Participation Administrator who are responsible for supporting Link to deliver this strategy.
- All staff will support this strategy, for example, Housing Officers, Link Property and Asset Management teams.

8. HOW LINK WILL COMMUNICATE WITH TENANTS

Link will produce at least 3 tenants' newsletters each year to update tenants on the strategy progress. The eNewsletter will provide the newsletter information by email for tenants who prefer this. The dedicated 'Get Involved' section on the Link website will be updated regularly. Quarterly updates will be published on the website and Facebook and Twitter social media pages. Staff can meet tenants face-to-face with updates when requested.

Tenants told Link that communication is key to improving tenant participation and influence. The strategy review process identified Link needs to improve how it involves tenants in the publication of information including tenant input into the website and newsletter. Link will also support tenant's groups to communicate more effectively with each other across a wide geographical area and with the communities they represent.

9. TENANT PARTICIPATION OUTCOMES

Outcomes are the results Link wish to achieve in this strategy. The six outcomes below cover the range of planned tenant participation activities. The outcomes are under the following headings;

- Influence
- Scrutiny
- Communication and Information
- Menu of ways to get involved
- Local Neighbourhood Engagement and Registered Tenant Organisations
- Training and capacity building

OUTCOME 1 - INFLUENCE

Tenants influence decision-making, customer service improvement and strategic priorities.

Tenants told Link their priorities for tenant participation and services they would like to influence more;

- Repairs
- Customer service and contacting Link
- Frontline services provided by housing officer
- Planned maintenance and investments
- Rent increases and assessing value for money

Link plans to review and consult tenants on the following during 2017-2020;

- Property Maintenance Policy
- Repairs standards and definitions for ARC repairs indicators
- Anti Social Behaviour Policy - Housing (Scotland) Act 2014 guidance
- Lettings Policy - Housing (Scotland) Act 2014 guidance
- Neighbourhood standards – improve ways for tenants to monitoring estate quality and environment and assess options for using GIS technology products to monitor estate quality
- Customer Service Standards review and tenant handbook update
- Link Housing Customer Services improvement priorities including – Mobile working/Digital Channel shift/self service, Welfare reform, Reviewing tenants and applicants applying for housing with Link, redesign of Sheltered Housing.

- Development services will review the ways in which they obtain feedback on new homes, new homes handbook information and developing the way new tenants are encouraged to become involved.

Tenant participation staff will work with managers responsible for the above policies to develop appropriate and engaging consultation methods and develop questions to identify parts of the policy that tenants can influence.

Tenants will be supported with briefing information and training so they understand the legislation, consultation scope and issues to participate meaningfully. Link acknowledges involving tenants in policy and strategy review requires resources and the timescales to do this properly must be considered. Tenants told Link they felt consultation can feel rushed and Link will respond by setting more realistic timescales for effective tenant input. Tenants are volunteers so Link must recognise the capacity and workload that tenants have.

Link will support tenants to engage and understand the national housing context, policy and legislation developed by Scottish Government. This could include training on the national context, visits to the Scottish Parliament and promote the opportunities to get involved in the Regional Networks which are Scottish Government structures for tenant participation.

OUTCOME 2 - SCRUTINY

Tenants are supported to scrutinise Link's performance of the Scottish Social Housing Charter outcomes. Tenants independently inspect services and make recommendations for improvement.

Link will continue to support independent tenant scrutiny of Link's performance and ability to meet the outcomes of the Scottish Social Housing Charter. The Panel membership is made up of nine tenants from across the central belt. Its role is to inspect services and performance from the tenants' perspective and gather evidence to make recommendations for improvement. It will start a new project in January 2017 to scrutinise Link's planned investments programme.

This year, Link won the Chartered Institute of Housing Excellence in Scrutiny Award which recognised the outstanding work achieved. Link was commended on its approach and the support it provides at all levels in the organisation to facilitate independent tenant scrutiny. Link is committed to sustaining this level of support to grow the scrutiny approach across other service areas.

Scrutiny practice has been evaluated by the Panel and it has agreed the following priorities to be included in this strategy;

- Carry out at least one comprehensive scrutiny inspection per year and produce a robust evidence based recommendations report.
- The Panel will look at Annual Review of the Charter (ARC) information on a regular basis.
- Monitor and evaluate the impact of scrutiny annually by getting feedback on the recommendations made.
- Participate in an annual learning and review event with Forth Valley scrutiny panels.
- Attend conferences and training.
- Consider any award applications two months in advance of submission deadlines.
- Review benchmarking information on Value for Money provided by Scotland's Housing Network.

- Send a Panel representative to LHA Board meetings every two months and LG Board as required.
- Develop the scrutiny structure to connect with RTOs and other parts of the tenant participation structure.
- Conduct an annual recruitment and induction exercise.
- Review the Terms of Reference in 2017.
- Meet with Board chairs at least once a year.
- Organise a stock visit and study visit.

OUTCOME 3 - COMMUNICATION AND INFORMATION

Link produces the tenant newsletter, tenant handbook, website and other tenant publications in partnership with tenants and supports tenants to understand the information provided. Communication is accessible and produced in reasonable timescales.

Link will write information in Plain English and adhere to Better Business writing standards and engage staff via the Communications Group. Link will innovate and look at new ways to communicate with tenants including the use of online methods, texts and social media opportunities for tenant participation. Information will be produced in accessible formats such as 'Browse Aloud', Braille and in other languages if requested. Videos and animations will be produced as new ways to communicate tenant participation messages.

Tenant feedback stated that Link should produce informal publications and avoid formal invite letters and consider more fun and inviting communications, for example, using leaflets and posters with simple messages.

OUTCOME 4 - MENU OF WAYS TO GET INVOLVED IN TENANT PARTICIPATION

Link provides a range of opportunities and methods to encourage tenant participation.

Link has developed a range of flexible ways for tenants to become involved and will continue to do this. Appropriate methods to the consultation topic and tenant preferences will be identified to ensure variety of tenants' views are considered. Options include focus groups, surveys and scrutiny techniques. Tenants told Link their top three preferred methods and Link will focus resources on improving these opportunities.

1. Local meetings and tenants' groups
2. Neighbourhood walkabouts
3. Online surveys and website

Link will continue to provide;

- Consultation register for interested individuals who will be sent invites to Regional Policy Forums and surveys.
- Sheltered Housing Forum
- Local tenants' groups and meetings –both formal RTOs and informal groups
- Tenant scrutiny activities
- East/Central and West Regional Policy Forums – to involve groups and individuals in policy consultations
- Link tour bus –events to promote tenant participation and services.
- Events

OUTCOME 5 - LOCAL NEIGHBOURHOOD ENGAGEMENT AND REGISTERED TENANT ORGANISATIONS (RTOs)

Link supports local tenant participation activities and provides opportunities and resources for community empowerment. RTOs are supported to participate effectively and to meet statutory responsibilities for consultation. Tenants are involved in monitoring estate quality.

A recent review of the effectiveness and support provided to RTO's has been carried out and recommendations will be included in the action plan. RTOs are independent organisations set up to represent tenants housing and community related issues. They have a recognised role in the tenant participation strategy and process and must meet criteria and responsibilities.

Work will include the production of formal guidance and role for Housing Officers and Tenant Participation staff to be developed which sets out statutory obligations and good practice for supporting groups. Housing Officers are the main local contact for estate related issues and Tenant Participation staff are responsible for developing the group action plan, training and support to get involved in consultations. Partnership Agreements will be developed with RTOs to set out rights, responsibilities, resources and support. This will include feedback and response times to RTO requests. A training calendar will be organised including; community engagement techniques, facilitation of AGMS, committee skills, keeping accounts, dealing with difficult meetings and developing local action plans.

A copy of the register of tenant organisations is attached in appendix 1.

In addition to the 12 RTOs Link will work with non registered and informal groups including supporting tenants to get involved in Linkscope. Activities to encourage tenant participation in new build developments will be set out in the action plan.

RTOs and effective local engagement will help deliver this strategy and Link needs to improve support and communication with groups to encourage them to respond to consultations. RTOs will be supported to communicate with each other via online methods and by holding an annual event for RTOs and Tenant Scrutiny Panel to meet and share experiences. If appropriate to the topic the Scrutiny Panel will consult RTOs when gathering evidence for scrutiny inspections.

The annual grant budget for RTOs will be monitored and groups supported to access charitable funders if appropriate. A calendar of RTO meetings will be published detailing the meeting dates.

Tenants told Link that tenant participation needs to be more community and neighbourhood focused and it is about more than core housing issues. Link will support tenants who want to organise other community activities e.g. involvement in volunteering such as food banks or community work.

OUTCOME 6 - TRAINING AND CAPACITY BUILDING

Tenants are empowered and develop skills to participate effectively in tenant participation. Tenants are supported to realise their potential and contribute to tenant participation activities.

Tenant empowerment and capacity building is key to delivering this strategy. A training plan to support tenants and staff to develop knowledge and skills for tenant participation will be

established. Link will use the tenant participation budget to buy in training or provide increased staff resource to help deliver an ongoing training programme. Training needs assessments with RTOs and Tenant Scrutiny Panel will be carried out at least every two years.

Staff identified they need training and support to;

- Set up and support local tenants' groups e.g., run a committee, hold an AGM, set local action plans, signpost to funders.
- Organise effective tenant consultation e.g. surveys, feedback and consultation methods.
- Understand tenant participation legislation and statutory obligations.
- Understand and supporting tenant scrutiny
- Write and produce tenant publications

The Employability Strategy will support the employment needs of Link tenants and communities by actively engaging with them and the partners Link work with. Opportunities will be promoted to tenants via tenant participation activities contained within the action plan.

The Digital Participation Strategy will continue to support tenant participation through its five main strands; access to devices, access to the internet, development of digital skills, motivation and trust to transact online and channel shift. Through the provision of laptops and tablets for loan, the arrangement of special broadband deals for tenants, and the opportunities to develop digital skills, Link delivers the tools required for tenants to fully participate. In addition to these core programmes other events such as Techy Tea Parties and information packs designed for tenant groups such as the guide for creating a free website and social media presence are offered.

10. MONITORING, PERFORMANCE MEASUREMENT AND REPORTING

The action plan will identify indicators, resources and timescales with lead officers responsible. Progress against the six strategy outcomes will be reported to LHA Board and managers quarterly.

The previous strategy review identified more work needs to be done with mainstream tenant participation at team meetings. A quarterly update will be published and sent to relevant line managers to provide information at staff team meetings and updates posted on Linkipedia (Link's internal intranet). Monthly discussions will be held at the Housing Services Coordinators team meeting to monitor frontline housing staff input.

There is very limited housing management system (Aareon) reporting of tenant participation at present. In the last strategy Link researched software options for recording and monitoring tenant participation and customer feedback. Link will revisit this issue and look at options for software to help measure tenant participation activities and outcomes.

11. STRATEGY REVIEW

Link undertakes to review this strategy regularly, with regard to:

- Business planning
- Tenants' priorities and needs
- Applicable legislation, rules, regulations and guidance
- Changes in the organisation
- Continued best practice

12. GLOSSARY/JARGON BUSTER

This will be added to the tenant version of this document.

Link will produce this information on request in Braille,
Audio Tape, Large Print and Community Languages.



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