



Housing Strategy and Performance: Affordable Housing Information & Guidance

Home in on Housing programme

Subject of Report	Affordable Housing Information & Guidance
Purpose of Report	Information / Recommendations / Decision Making
Background Papers	Housing Strategy - Housing Strategy January 2024 to January 2029 - Dorset Council Council plan - https://www.dorsetcouncil.gov.uk/dorset-council-plan-2024-to-2029?p_l_back_url=%2Fsearch%3Fp_l_back_url%3D%252Fsearch%253Fq%253DHousing%252Bstrategy%26q%3Dcouncil%2Bplan Housing Strategy Consultation Report Appendix B - Consultation Report 30112023 People and Health Overview Committee.pdf Joseph Rowntree – How to talk about housing A framing toolkit: How to talk about homes Joseph Rowntree Foundation

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Summary and project purpose

Summary and project purpose

This project objective is to produce a report and recommendations on affordable housing language as part of phase 1 of the 'Home In on Housing' programme to deliver Dorset Council's Housing Strategy January 2024 – January 2029.

This report presents comprehensive research into housing terminology and communication challenges faced by Dorset Council, centred around language associated with affordable housing and housing affordability. It presents analysis of Dorset residents' views and opinions, based on two rounds of engagement surveys totalling 335 responses, analysis of current Dorset Council housing webpages, and integration of best practices from the housing sector including Joseph Rowntree Foundation research.

The engagement analysis confirms significant confusion among residents regarding housing terminology, with "affordable housing" scoring 2.50/5 for clarity (57.1% find unclear) and "housing affordability" scoring 2.75/5 (48.6% find unclear). Additionally, 50.4% of residents cannot distinguish between these two terms.

A critical discovery emerged from website analysis: comprehensive local connection criteria exist within Dorset Council's Housing Allocations Policy, but this information is buried in policy documents and not prominently communicated to residents. This creates a paradox where residents believe housing doesn't prioritise local people, when it does through detailed local connection requirements.

This report will support the development of a new communication strategy for Dorset Council and adoption of enhanced language for both internal and external communication, addressing the action plan requirement to "Review current information about affordable (all types) housing terms and design new campaign to raise awareness."

Project Background

This project was initiated in direct response to resident feedback received during Dorset Council's housing strategy consultation. Residents expressed significant confusion around the term "affordable housing" and its relationship to "housing affordability." This confusion stems from the disconnect between government definitions and residents lived experiences of housing costs in Dorset.

The Government defines affordable housing as "housing provided to those whose needs are not met by the market," including social rent, affordable rent, and affordable routes to home ownership. However, with average house prices in Dorset at £335,000 and average rent at £1,023 per month (October 2025)ⁱ, even properties

offered at 20% below market rate often remain unaffordable to residents on median local wages of £31,444ⁱⁱ

1.2 Project Aims and Objectives

Primary Aims:

1. To gain a better understanding of residents' views on affordable housing terminology
2. To recommend how the council communicates more efficiently on affordable housing guidance
3. To provide correct, understandable, and targeted information to residents
4. To identify whether there is a need for new, local definitions for affordable housing.
5. To address the communication gap regarding local connection criteria

Specific Objectives:

1. Research to understand affordability terminology confusion through resident engagement.
2. Identify residents' current understanding and communication preferences.
3. Analyse current Dorset Council housing website language and messaging
4. Research best practices from other Local Authorities and housing sector experts.
5. Develop evidence-based recommendations for improved communication approaches.
6. Create implementation plan for enhanced housing communication strategy.

1.3 Project Scope

This research focuses specifically on language and terminology recommendations for communicating with residents about housing. It does not include analysis of what is financially affordable for Dorset residents in financial terms, which will be addressed in a separate piece of work.

In Scope:

- Dorset Council information and guidance terminology
- Dorset Council website pages relevant to affordable housing
- Resident engagement and feedback analysis
- National research on communication best practices
- Government definitions and terminology analysis
- Campaign recommendations around affordable housing definitions.

Out of Scope

- Financial affordability analysis for Dorset residents

- Housing allocation policy changes
- Planning policy recommendations
- Detailed housing needs assessment

What we looked at

Throughout the course of this project, we have considered and included information from the following sources:

Resident Engagement Research

- Round 1 Survey (July 2025): 55 responses from Dorset residents
- Round 2 Survey (August 2025): 280 responses from Dorset residents
- Total responses: 335 (89.3% general public, 10.7% council employees)
- Previous consultation feedback: Housing Strategy consultation responses highlighting terminology confusion.

Dorset Council Website Analysis

- Main Housing Page (<https://www.dorsetcouncil.gov.uk/housing/housing>)
- Register for Housing (<https://www.dorsetcouncil.gov.uk/housing/register-for-housing>)
- Affordable Housing (<https://www.dorsetcouncil.gov.uk/w/affordable-housing>)
- Homelessness and Housing Advice (<https://www.dorsetcouncil.gov.uk/housing/homelessness>)
- Housing Allocations Policy documents
- Local connection criteria documentation

Best Practice Research

- Joseph Rowntree Foundation: "How to Talk About Homes: A Framing Toolkit" - research-backed communication framework.
- Local Government Association: Good practice guides on housing communication
- Tendring District Council: Housing jargon guide and plain English approaches
- Local Authority examples: Communication approaches from comparable councils

Policy and Strategic Context

- Dorset Council Housing Strategy January 2024 – January 2029
- Dorset Council Plan 2024 – 2029
- National Planning Policy Framework 2024
- Government affordable housing definitions and guidance
- Housing allocation policies and local connection criteria

Data Sources

- Survey response data and statistical analysis

- Website content analysis and user journey mapping
- Comparative analysis of local authority communication approaches
- Academic research on housing communication effectiveness
- Resident feedback and consultation responses

The comprehensive nature of these sources ensures that recommendations are grounded in both resident preferences and established best practices, creating an evidence-based approach to improving housing communication.

Key Findings

Resident Survey Results: Significant Terminology Confusion

The resident engagement surveys revealed substantial confusion around housing terminology that directly impacts residents' understanding of available housing options.

Clarity Scores (1-5 scale, where 5 = very clear):

- "Affordable Housing": 2.50/5 average (57.1% find unclear)
- "Housing Affordability": 2.75/5 average (48.6% find unclear)
- 50.4% of residents cannot distinguish between the two terms.

Key Statistical Findings:

- 335 total responses across two survey rounds (409% increase from Round 1 to Round 2)
- Consistent confusion across both survey rounds
- Strong preference for plain English alternatives
- Clear demand for "homes for local people" messaging
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Resident Preferences:

- Replace "affordable housing" with terms like "lower rent homes" "lower cost homes", "below market rate homes", or "housing association homes for local people" and "government-supported homes" when specifically referencing how new homes were financed.
- Replace "affordability" with terms like "homes people can afford to live in".
- Emphasise local connection and priority for local people.
- Use clear, honest communication about housing allocation.
- Focus on community benefits rather than individual benefits.

Critical Discovery: The Local Connection Paradox

Website analysis revealed a significant communication paradox that undermines resident trust and understanding:

The Paradox:

- Residents believe: Housing doesn't go to local people.
- Reality: Comprehensive local connection criteria exist and are actively applied.
- Problem: Local connection information is buried in policy documents and invisible to residents.

Existing Local Connection Criteria Include:

- Residency requirements (2-3 years out of last 5 years)
- Employment criteria (16+ hours per week for 1+ year)
- Family connection requirements (parents, siblings, children with 5+ years residency)
- Various other local ties and connections

Impact of Hidden Information:

- Residents frustrated that housing "doesn't go to local people."
- Missed opportunities to build trust and support.
- Confusion about housing allocation priorities.
- Negative perception of the councils housing policies.

Website Communication Analysis

Current Website Issues:

- 1. Terminology Problems:**
 - All pages use "affordable housing" terminology that 57.1% find unclear.
 - Technical definitions without context or explanation
- 2. Hidden Local Connection Information:**
 - Comprehensive criteria exist but are buried in policy documents.
 - No prominent messaging about local priority on main pages.
 - Local connection criteria not explained upfront to residents.
- 3. Inconsistent Messaging:**
 - Some excellent local messaging exists (especially on affordable housing page)
 - Not consistently applied across all pages
 - Mixed approach to plain English communication
- 4. Missed Trust-Building Opportunities:**
 - Doesn't acknowledge resident concerns about terminology.
 - Doesn't explain existing local connection criteria.
 - Misses chance to reassure residents about local priority.

Positive Elements Found:

- Some strong local messaging: "Local people struggle to afford to live in the area."
- Community Land Trusts section: "build affordable homes for local people within their communities."
- Good structural design and navigation

Best Practice Research Integration

Joseph Rowntree Foundation Framework (JRF): Research-backed communication principles that align strongly with resident preferences:

1. Health and Wellbeing Focus: Connect homes to community health rather than economic arguments.
2. Responsibility: Build collective responsibility for ensuring everyone has decent homes.
3. Foundations Metaphor: "Decent homes provide the foundation for strong communities"
4. Critical Tone with Solutions: Name problems but provide specific solutions to build efficacy.

Alignment with Resident Research:

- JRF emphasis on "homes" vs "housing" aligns with resident preference for clearer language.
- JRF community focus aligns with resident desire for "homes for local people."
- JRF plain English approach matches resident communication preferences.
- JRF solution-focused approach addresses resident frustration with current housing system.

Local Authority Examples:

- Tendring District Council: Comprehensive housing jargon guide with plain English explanations
- Various councils: Examples of prominent local connection messaging
- Best practice themes: Simplicity, resident focus, acknowledgment of confusion, clear communication

Resident Voice: Key Themes from Survey Responses

Direct Resident Feedback Themes:

1. **Frustration with Misleading Language:**
 - "Affordable housing isn't affordable for local people."
 - "The terms are confusing and don't mean what they say."
 - "Need honest language about what housing actually costs."

2. **Strong Desire for Local Priority:**

- "Housing should go to local people first."
- "People with local connections should get priority."
- "Local families need to be able to stay in their communities."

3. **Preference for Plain English:**

- "Use normal language that people understand."
- "Explain what things actually mean"?
- "Stop using government jargon."

4. **Community Focus:**

- "Housing affects the whole community."
- "Local housing keeps communities strong."
- "When local people can't afford homes, communities suffer?"

These findings demonstrate clear alignment between resident preferences and best practice research, providing a strong foundation for enhanced communication recommendations.

Recommendations

Based on analysis of resident feedback, website review, and best practice research, the following recommendations provide a framework for enhanced housing communication that addresses both clarity and persuasiveness.

Enhanced Communication Framework

Core Principles Integration:

1. **General Principles**

- Use the word homes instead of housing
- Replace 'affordable housing' and 'affordability' with messaging led by residents' preference.

2. **Health and Community Wellbeing**

- Connect local homes to community health and wellbeing.
- Show how local homes strengthen entire communities.
- Move beyond individual benefits to collective impact.

3. **Responsibility for Local Communities**

- Frame housing as collective responsibility.
- Use "we," "us," "our" language for community ownership.
- Connect local connection to dignity and community values.

4. Foundations for Strong Communities

- Use "Foundations" metaphor for local community strength.
- Show how local homes provide foundation for thriving communities.
- Connect individual housing to community resilience.

5. Critical Analysis with Local Solutions

- Point out where our communication about local connection isn't working.
- Provide specific solutions for local housing challenges.
- Show how system can be redesigned for local communities.

Priority Website Improvements

1. Main Housing Page - CRITICAL PRIORITY

Current Problem: Uses confusing "affordable housing" terminology with no prominent local connection messaging.

Enhanced Opening Statement:

Decent, affordable homes provide the foundation for strong, healthy communities in Dorset.

Our homes are fundamental to our health and wellbeing. When local people have access to decent, affordable homes, it strengthens our entire community - supporting local schools, shops, and services that we all depend on.

As a community, we have a responsibility to ensure that local people can access the homes they need to thrive. That's why Dorset Council's allocations policy prioritises people with strong local connections to the area.

Enhanced Local Connection Callout Box:

Callout boxes, also known as pull quotes, sidebars, or highlight boxes, are visual

Strong Foundations for Local Communities

Decent homes provide the foundation for thriving local communities. In Dorset, we prioritise local people because:

- *Local families strengthen our schools and communities*
- *Local workers support our economy and services*
- *Local connections create the social bonds that make communities resilient*
- *Everyone deserves the dignity of a decent home in their community*

Our housing system is designed to support people with local connections, including those who live, work, or have family in Dorset.

Find out more about local connection criteria →

elements used to draw attention to specific pieces of information within a larger document or webpage. It might look something like this:

Enhanced Navigation Links:

- Current: "Register for housing" → Enhanced: "Join our housing register - supporting local people"
- Current: "Affordable housing" → Enhanced: "Lower cost homes for local communities"

2. Register for Housing Page - CRITICAL PRIORITY

Enhanced Opening Section:

Housing Register: Building Strong Foundations for Local Families

Our homes are fundamental to our health and wellbeing. When local people have decent, affordable homes, it creates strong foundations for thriving communities across Dorset.

As a community, we have a responsibility to ensure local people can access the homes they need. That's why our housing register prioritises people with strong local connections - because local homes strengthen local communities.

Right now, over 6,000 local people are on our register. We're working to redesign our housing system to better serve local communities, but we need your help to understand local housing need.

Enhanced Eligibility Framework:

Building Strong Foundations: Who Can Join Our Register

To join our housing register, you need to show both local connection and housing need - because decent homes provide the foundation for strong local communities.

Local Connection - Why This Matters:

When local people have decent homes, it strengthens our entire community. Local families support our schools, local workers contribute to our economy, and local connections create the social bonds that make communities resilient.

You may have a local connection if you:

- Live or work in Dorset (contributing to our local community)
- Have family in the area (part of our community network)
- Have other strong local ties (connected to our community)

Housing Need - Everyone Deserves Dignity:

As a community, we have a responsibility to ensure everyone has access to a decent home. You may qualify if:

- You cannot afford to buy or rent suitable housing at market prices
- Your current housing is unsuitable for your needs
- You are homeless or at risk of homelessness

3. Affordable Housing Page - MEDIUM PRIORITY

Enhanced Opening:

Lower cost homes: Strong Foundations for Local Communities

Our homes are fundamental to our health and wellbeing. Decent, homes that people can afford to live in provide the foundation for strong, thriving communities across Dorset.

Right now, we're facing a housing issue that threatens the foundations of our local communities. Local people struggle to afford homes, with average house prices at £335,000 and average rent at £1,023 per month. This isn't just about individual hardship. When local people can't access decent homes, it undermines the health and wellbeing of our entire community.

As a community, we have a responsibility to ensure local people can access decent homes. That's why we're working to increase the number of lower cost homes in Dorset, to prioritise local communities and provide the strong foundations everyone needs for a decent life.

Terminology Standards

Core Language Replacements:

- "Affordable housing" → "Lower cost homes"
- "Housing affordability" → "Housing costs you can manage."
- "Property" → "Homes"
- "Housing market" → "Housing system"
- "Housing" → "Homes"

Enhanced Messaging Patterns:

Opening Pattern (All Pages):

1. Health/wellbeing statement: "Our homes are fundamental to our health and wellbeing."
2. Local community connection: "When local people have decent homes, it strengthens our entire community."

3. Responsibility: "As a community, we have a responsibility..."
4. Local connection criteria: "That's why our housing allocations policy prioritises people with local connections."

Critical Analysis Pattern:

Note: This is an example of a critical analysis pattern from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation. This example is not about Dorset Council.

1. Name the crisis: "We're facing a housing crisis that threatens local communities."
2. Point to responsibility: "The government has failed to build enough homes for local people."
3. Show redesign possibility: "Our housing system can be designed to prioritise local communities."
4. Provide specific solutions: "Through [specific solutions], we can create strong foundations for everyone."

Risk Management

Identified Risks and Mitigation:

1. Staff Resistance to Change
 - *Risk:* Reluctance to adopt new messaging approach
 - *Mitigation:* Comprehensive training, clear evidence of effectiveness, leadership support
 - *Responsibility:* Housing leadership and communications teams
2. Resident Confusion During Transition
 - *Risk:* Temporary confusion as messaging changes
 - *Mitigation:* Clear explanation of improvements, gradual implementation, feedback mechanisms
 - *Responsibility:* Communications team with resident engagement
3. Inconsistent Implementation
 - *Risk:* Mixed application of new framework
 - *Mitigation:* Clear guidelines, regular consistency checks, refresher training
 - *Responsibility:* Project coordinator and communications team
4. Resource Constraints
 - *Risk:* Insufficient time or staff for full implementation
 - *Mitigation:* Phased approach, priority focus, external support if needed
 - *Responsibility:* Project management and housing leadership

Expected Outcomes

Immediate Benefits (1-3 months):

- Reduced terminology confusion affecting 50%+ of residents.
- Increased awareness of local connection criteria
- Enhanced trust through transparent communication
- Improved resident satisfaction with housing information

Medium-term Benefits (3-12 months):

- Increased community support for local housing policies
- Enhanced engagement in housing consultations
- Stronger sense of collective responsibility for housing
- Improved staff confidence in housing communication

Long-term Benefits (12+ months):

- Transformed housing discourse focused on community wellbeing.
- Model communication approach for other council services.
- Stronger community foundations through better housing understanding
- Enhanced advocacy for local housing needs

This comprehensive approach addresses both the immediate clarity issues identified by residents and the broader communication challenges revealed through best practice research, creating a foundation for more effective housing communication that serves both residents and the council's strategic objectives.

Conclusion

This comprehensive research project has revealed both significant challenges and clear opportunities for enhancing Dorset Council's housing communication. The findings demonstrate that current terminology confusion affects residents, while comprehensive local connection criteria exist but remain hidden from public view.

Appendix A - Implementation Plan

Phase 1: Critical Changes (1-2 weeks)

Priority: Address most urgent communication failures

Actions:

- Replace "affordable housing" terminology on main pages.
- Add prominent local connection messaging to main housing page.
- Create local connection callout boxes.
- Update navigation language.

- Integrate health/wellbeing framing.

Success Criteria:

- All critical terminology updated.
- Local connection criteria prominently featured.
- Consistent messaging across high-priority pages

Phase 2: Comprehensive Integration (2-4 weeks)

Priority: Full framework implementation

Actions:

- Complete integration of enhanced messaging framework
- Update all linked documents and pages.
- Implement systematic critical analysis with solutions.
- Create coherent narrative across all pages.

Success Criteria:

- Complete framework integration
- Staff training materials developed.
- Coherent messaging strategy implemented.

Phase 3: System-Wide Enhancement (4-8 weeks)

Priority: Organisational integration

Actions:

- Update all housing-related communications.
- Train staff on enhanced communication approach
- Implement monitoring systems.
- Create feedback mechanisms.
- Create communication style playbook for use across organisation.

Success Criteria:

- Complete organisational alignment
- Staff confident in enhanced messaging
- Monitoring systems operational

Phase 4: Monitoring and Refinement (Ongoing)

Priority: Continuous improvement

Actions:

- Monitor clarity and persuasiveness metrics.
- Track community engagement and support.
- Refine approach based on feedback.
- Share best practices with other services.

Success Criteria:

- Improved resident understanding scores
- Enhanced community support for housing policies
- Ongoing refinement based on feedback.

Success Measurement Framework

Quantitative Metrics:

- **Clarity Measures:** Terminology understanding, confusion reduction (target: 50% reduction in confusion)
- **Engagement Measures:** Website usage, application rates, consultation participation (target: 25% increase)
- **Community Support:** Policy support surveys, community feedback (target: 30% increase in support)

Qualitative Metrics:

- **Resident Feedback:** Both clarity and persuasiveness elements
- **Community Discourse:** Shift toward community-focused language
- **Staff Feedback:** Confidence in using enhanced messaging.
- **Case Studies:** Examples of enhanced understanding and engagement

Monitoring Schedule:

- **Weekly:** Website analytics and response tracking
- **Monthly:** Customer service query analysis
- **Quarterly:** Performance review including persuasiveness measures
- **Bi-annually:** Resident satisfaction and policy support survey
- **Annually:** Full communication effectiveness assessment

ⁱ [Dorset Rental Prices & Market Trends 2025](#)

ⁱⁱ [Earnings and hours worked, place of residence by local authority: ASHE Table 8 - Office for National Statistics](#)