

Listen, act, learn: aspirations for tenant and resident involvement

Regulatory Board for Wales
Tenants at the Heart Review – part two

MAY 2019

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Executive summary

The Regulatory Board for Wales (RBW) has commissioned its independent review of tenant engagement 'Tenants at the Heart' against a background of heightened interest in and concern about the topic. The aim is to consider how best to hear the tenants' and residents' voice in the work of the board, the regulator and of housing associations.

This part of the review, like all other RBW reviews, has sought views from right across the sector and our report aims to really make a difference in improving approaches to tenant and resident involvement.

This report forms part two of the Tenants at the Heart review, conducted by HQN on behalf of RBW. HQN was commissioned to conduct a survey and focus groups with residents, staff, board members and other stakeholders in social housing in Wales, to research resident engagement. The focus is on aspirations for tenant engagement now and in the future.

The survey received a very substantial response with 575 people taking part, divided into two groups: tenants and residents; and staff, board members and stakeholders (SBS).

The most popular response to the question: 'What should resident involvement be aiming to achieve now and in the future?' from both groups was 'Listening to views: Giving you (residents) quick and easy ways to tell your landlord about what you want and need – for yourself, the neighbourhood and the community.'

Two options offered for 'resident management' and 'resident ownership' were the least favoured as aspirations, though a significant minority beyond those already living or working in co-ops or mutuals did want this option.

From the high levels of support among respondents for the various types or levels of involvement offered, it can be said that there is a strong appetite among residents for engagement and dialogue with their landlord, and vice versa.

When asked to summarise in a few words the key ingredient for successful engagement, 'listening', 'communication', 'trust', 'transparency' and 'honesty' were the top choices.

Asked about the sort of dialogue they wanted, participants returned to the theme of 'listening' and building relationships. Tenants wanted to be properly informed, and to have the chance to give their views, object if necessary, and have a genuinely open discussion.

Asking about trust and respect moved the discussion into a series of related issues of openness, power, accountability and above all dialogue. Notions of trust and respect are identified as fundamentally about the culture of an organisation, the mindset of staff and its leadership.

Asked how we can know resident involvement works, the general feeling was that it would be demonstrated via results – but these could be 'soft' results such as better understanding, as well as practical actions.

We asked where participants think we are now on the resident involvement journey, and how far there is to go. Some tenants expressed a feeling that the relationship is difficult, and power very unbalanced. Results from a spider graph exercise were more positive, suggesting that housing associations are doing quite a good job, though with strong variations from some people on some points.

Conclusions: three key questions

The RBW posed three key questions for this study to consider: What is tenant engagement trying to achieve now and in the future; what works to achieve this and how do we really know it works?

Throughout the study there was a strong emphasis from all groups on soft skills and outcomes. A call to 'embolden ourselves' summarised the important point of tenants and residents demanding respect and receiving it.

We argue therefore that the purpose of resident involvement is not primarily to bring about specific practical outcomes but to engender a relationship of mutual trust, built through honest dialogue and respect, and embedded at every level.

A strong message coming over is about the culture of organisations: repeated references to authenticity, genuineness, commitment and honesty suggest that residents and professionals alike want to see organisations being open to dialogue, committed to it, and committed to making the changes that residents feel are needed. That will involve some power sharing and compromise.

The quality of 'listening' to tenants and residents was found to be necessary but not enough. It must be accompanied by a quality of taking on board what is said, being seen to respond to it, and then to learn from it. As we say above, study participants felt they would know resident involvement was working by both practical results and achievement of better understanding. This could be summarised as 'Listen, act, learn'.

Our three-point summary of the essentials for working toward successful resident involvement, based on the study responses, is given at the end of this report, with a word wheel to aid organisations in their work to improve.

1 Introduction and acknowledgement

Since the Grenfell fire there has been a renewed drive for tenants and residents in social housing to be fully involved in the way their landlords operate. This demand extends further than the immediate and crucial issue of safety, to all aspects of the way social landlords organise themselves and the services they provide. Above all, tenants want their voice and views to be heard – by landlords and by government.

The Regulatory Board for Wales (RBW) has commissioned its independent review of tenant engagement against this background of heightened interest in and concern about the topic. The aim is to consider how best to hear the tenants' and residents' voice in the work of the board, the regulator and of housing associations.

In the first part of the research, Tamsin Stirling reported on the background and context, covering language; recent publications; national standards and principles; and an outline of the 'contested and confused territory' that is tenant engagement. She offered a set of pointers on how the work might be taken forward, bearing in mind three key questions posed by the steering group:

- What is tenant engagement trying to achieve now and in the future?
- What works to achieve this?
- How do we really know it works?

This part of the review, like all other RBW reviews, has sought views from right across the sector and our report aims to really make a difference in improving approaches to tenant and resident involvement. We acknowledge and draw on Tamsin's work. Our report also draws on the board's improving governance report of March 2018, *The Right Stuff* (Regulatory Board for Wales, 2018). In a nutshell, this found that good governance means 'The right people doing the right things, in the right way, for the right reasons, at the right time'. In particular it drew attention to behaviours and culture in organisations, driven forward by great leadership, as key ingredients on the journey to improvement. This report includes a 'Right stuff' model on how best to approach really hearing the tenants' voice – and acting on it.

This report covers part two of the *Tenants at the Heart* review, conducted by HQN on behalf of the Regulatory Board. It contains an analysis of findings from the survey and focus groups held in March/April 2019 with tenants and other residents, staff and board members, and other stakeholders in the social housing sector in Wales. We conclude with some learning from the review and practical points for housing associations. First, we begin with a brief outline of the approach taken.

We are grateful to each and every participant in our survey and focus groups. Thanks are also due to the steering group from the Welsh Government and RBW, TPAS Cymru, and Rob Gershon.

2 Approach and methodology

HQN was commissioned to conduct a survey and focus groups with residents, staff, board members and other stakeholders in social housing, to research resident engagement in the light of Part one of the study. Specifically, the Regulatory Board wanted to focus on the future and aspirations for tenant engagement, not on where we are now or have been.

HQN was given a nine-point continuum of tenant engagement parameters to act as the basis of the survey. These points were:

- Data (tenant insight)
- Telling – information
- Asking – information
- Giving choices
- Collaboration
- Co-design/co-production
- Shared leadership
- Delegated power
- Ownership.

The survey was required to address three locations or aspects of engagement: services, strategy, and the wider community. The survey was to be brief, and able to be completed quickly.

HQN devised a survey with a single question: *What should resident involvement be aiming to achieve now and in the future?* Respondents were asked to tick as many from nine offered answers, based on the parameters above, as they thought applied. Respondents were then asked to summarise, in a couple of words, *what is the key ingredient for successful resident involvement?* From this further data we built a word cloud.

Various details were then asked about the type of housing they lived in or the housing association provided, and various protected characteristics were garnered for equalities purposes. Full details of the survey questions are given at Appendix one.

The survey ran for three weeks in March/April 2019. It was mainly electronic, available in English and Welsh, and paper copies were made available as needed. Distribution was via RBW and HQN contacts, and housing organisations were asked to distribute and encourage completion by residents, staff, board members, and other stakeholders. TPAS Cymru also promoted the survey and we are grateful for their help.

Survey participants were asked if they would like to take part in a focus group, and the focus groups were also promoted via the same contacts as the survey. Focus groups were held separately for residents; and for staff, board members and stakeholders together. The

locations were Cardiff and Abergele (a further focus group in Swansea was cancelled as too few people volunteered, but those who had booked were offered a place at the Cardiff one).

The content of the focus groups was informed by the survey findings. We explored participants' views and aspirations via five topics for discussion:

- Dialogue
- Trust and respect (culture)
- Relationship working
- Control
- The gap between aspiration and where we are now.

We also asked participants about language, and what terms they preferred. A summary of the topics and prompts is given at Appendix two.

For the last topic, we introduced spider graphs for participants to complete. An example is given at Appendix three. The idea was to get a feel for how wide the gap might be between today's reality and the aspirations of the two study groups. The graphs were turned into numerical tables for analysis.

Analysis of the various components was via mixed qualitative and quantitative methods. The next section sets out the findings.

3 Survey findings

There was a very substantial response to the survey, with 575 received in total. Some people skipped individual questions or sections of the survey, and there were a small number of blank responses. Following this we have numbers for people answering either Q1 or Q2 as follows:

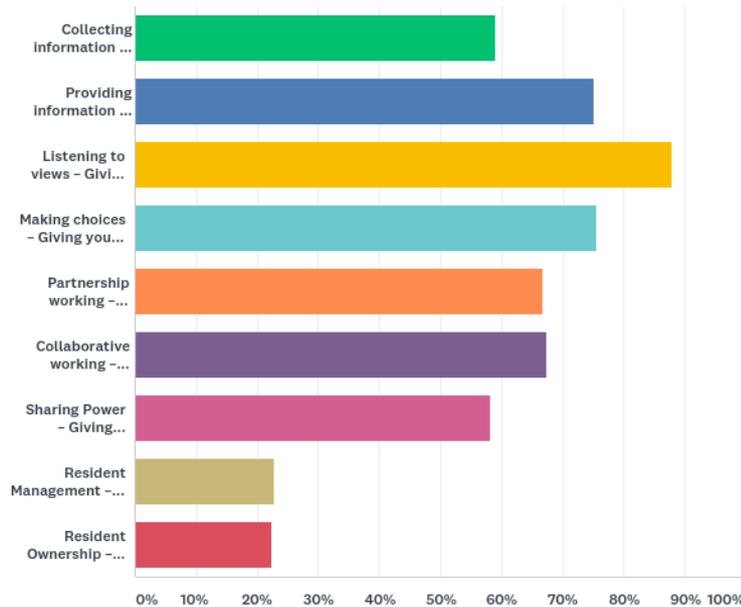
Q1/Q2 What should resident involvement be aiming to achieve now and in the future?

Resident	273
Staff/board/stakeholder	247
Total	520

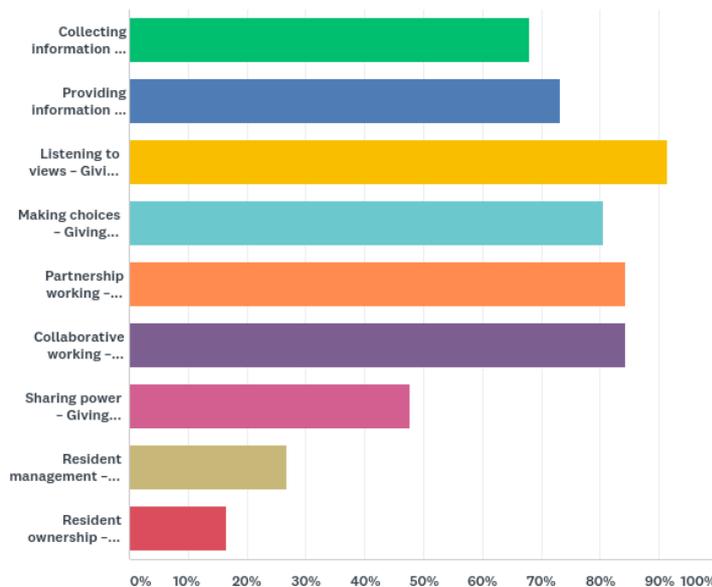
3.1. Q1/Q2 – What resident involvement should be aiming to achieve

The responses received are shown here split into one graph for residents and one for staff, board members and stakeholders together.

Q1 If you are a resident (tenant, leaseholder, shared owner or other resident), please tell us what you think resident involvement should be aiming to achieve now and in the future. Tick all the items that apply (move to question 2 if not a resident).



Q2 If you are a staff member/board member/stakeholder, please tell us what you think resident involvement should be aiming to achieve now and in the future. Tick all the items that apply (move to question 3 if a resident).



Within the resident group, all but 4% were tenants. Three were leaseholders, one a shared owner and six were tenants in a mutual or co-op.

It is clear that there is a good deal of agreement among the two groups about what resident involvement should be aiming to achieve. Among residents, the greatest support is for 'Listening to views – giving you quick and easy ways to tell your landlord about what you want and need – for yourself, the neighbourhood and the community'. At 89% in favour, this relatively modest idea can be said to have very strong support. Among staff, board members and stakeholders, listening was the top response again, even more strongly at 91%.

The next two most popular ideas with residents are 'Making choices'¹ (76%) and 'Providing information'² (75%). Together these suggest a focus on local services and value for money.

Ideas that take residents into wider dialogue with their landlord through partnership, collaborative working and/or sharing power found favour with more than half and up to two thirds of those responding. The SBS group also favoured these options, suggesting very strong support for close working with tenants.

The resident management and ownership options were the least favoured at 23% and 22% respectively among residents, and 27% and 17% respectively in the SBS group. Though it is clear that these are not seen as an aim of resident involvement by most tenants responding, a significant minority who currently live in 'traditional' housing organisations (not co-ops or mutuals) do favour these options.

There is a notable difference between responses to 'Sharing power'³ and 'Resident management'⁴ (59% and 23% respectively among residents). This could suggest that residents are more interested in a general principle of sharing power than in the particular formalised structure; or perhaps that some do not want to take the formal step of taking on full responsibility for running services. This issue was explored further in the focus groups (see next section).

From the high levels of support among respondents for the various types or levels of involvement offered, it can be said that there is a strong appetite among residents for engagement and dialogue with their landlord, and vice versa. It must be borne in mind that this is a self-selecting sample, but given the large number of responses, it does suggest that many people want more than a 'consumer exchange' type of relationship.

¹ 'Making choices – giving you real choices about your home and neighbourhood, and what services cost'

² 'Providing information – giving you the information you need on how well your landlord is doing (such as on the quality of services, value for money, and safety) by providing open and honest reports'

³ 'Sharing power – giving residents and the landlord an equal say, now and for the future, by sharing power within in a community organisation'

⁴ 'Resident management – where residents want to, handing over the management of certain estates or services, like repairs, to you'

The option that gained greatest support – ‘Listening’⁵ – contains the element of speed. It seemed the desire for ‘quick and easy’ communication, and taking action, might well be a factor in this strong response – and this was confirmed in the focus groups.

3.2. Q3 – What is the key ingredient for successful resident involvement?

We have built a word cloud from the responses to this question.

Summarising using only a few words (two to three preferably), what is the key ingredient for successful resident involvement?



Clear themes emerge around ideas of dialogue, openness, respect and trust. These themes echo the data from Q1/Q2 where ‘listening’ had very strong support, with choices, partnership, collaborative working and sharing information also favoured. A number of responses highlighted ideas about authenticity: ‘Genuine communication both ways’, ‘True involvement genuine’, ‘Not token gesture’ and ‘Genuine meaningful opportunities that affect real change’, for example.

Differences between responses from tenants/residents and staff/board members/stakeholders were not particularly marked. It could be said that the latter group mentioned ideas about power sharing more often, but even within that group it was not among the most frequently mentioned ideas. By way of illustration of the fluidity of ideas between both groups, ‘equality of power’ was said by a senior staff member, while ‘truly listen to what tenants’ priorities are’ was a staff member involved in tenant engagement. One resident said: ‘Fully participating in governance of the organisation,’ and another ‘Genuine partnerships’.

⁵ ‘Listening to views – giving you quick and easy ways to tell your landlord about what you want and need – for yourself, the neighbourhood and the community’

A small number of tenants (only three or four in the whole sample) expressed open frustration at the behaviour of their housing association. Comments included: 'Actually knocking on my door for change', and 'Telling us as it is, not trying to blind us with nonsense'. It is possible that this represents a wider viewpoint that our survey did not manage to tap into; we sought to explore this further in the focus groups.

One tenant raised a practical issue: 'Actually repairing their houses when they ask, not leave them for months and ignore them completely', but this was very much the exception. The great majority of responses focused on qualitative matters to do with relationships.

The themes from the word cloud of listening, respect, openness and communication suggest that these might be seen as the foundations for putting the ideas in Q1/Q2 into action. It is clear that both groups of respondents are looking to what could be termed soft or people skills as a key ingredient in successful tenant and resident engagement.

3.3. *Segmenting the responses*

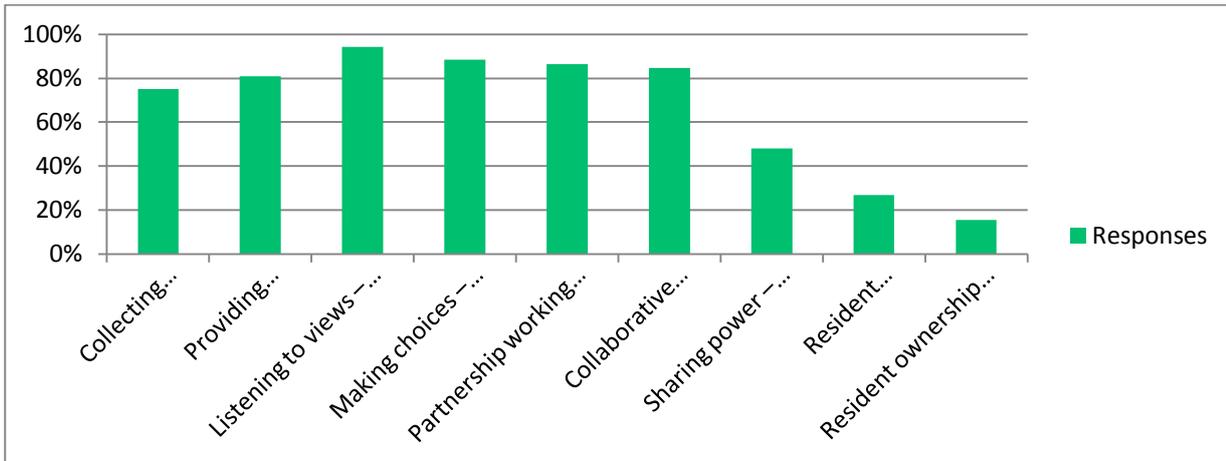
A further breakdown of responses offers more insights.

Among residents, nearly half were residents of a large organisation, while 4% were in a co-op or mutual. The six co-op/mutual residents is too small a sample to draw conclusions. However, it is interesting to find that while collaborative working received most support, and the other 'partnership', 'listening' options were also popular; as in the general sample, resident management and ownership were less popular (40%) among this group, albeit at higher levels of approval than in the whole sample. On the word cloud, responses included: 'Fully participating in the governance of the organisation' and 'Equality. Diversity. Respect'.

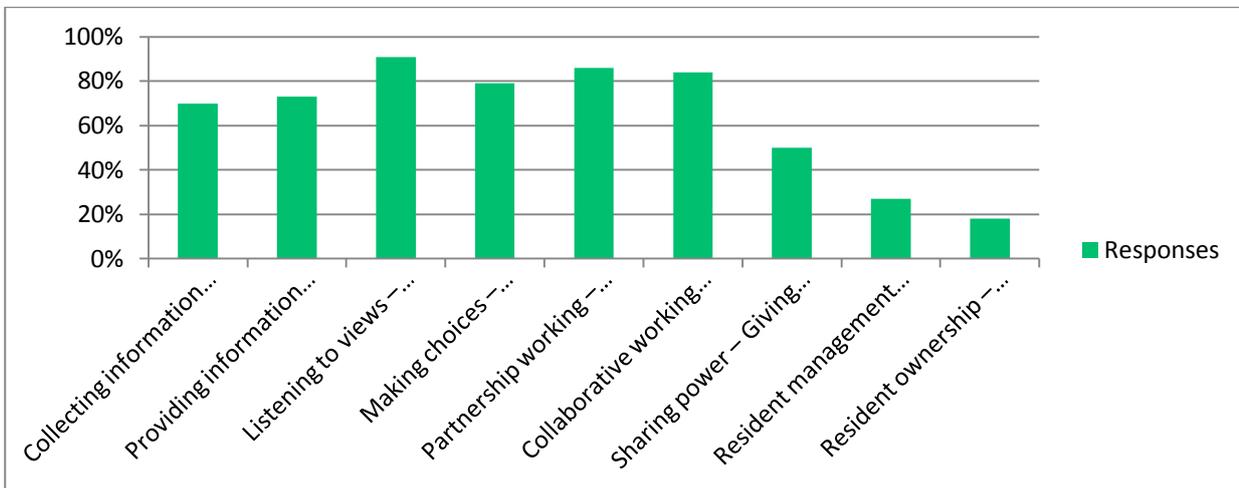
Among staff and board members, 28% of respondents were senior managers or executives. Just over half (51%) were staff members directly involved in tenant engagement, while 4% were tenant board members and 17% non-resident board members. Most (53%) worked for a medium sized organisation, offering mainly general housing (90%) in towns/cities (66%), and only 3% worked for a co-op or mutual.

Differences in responses to Q2 within this group were not marked:

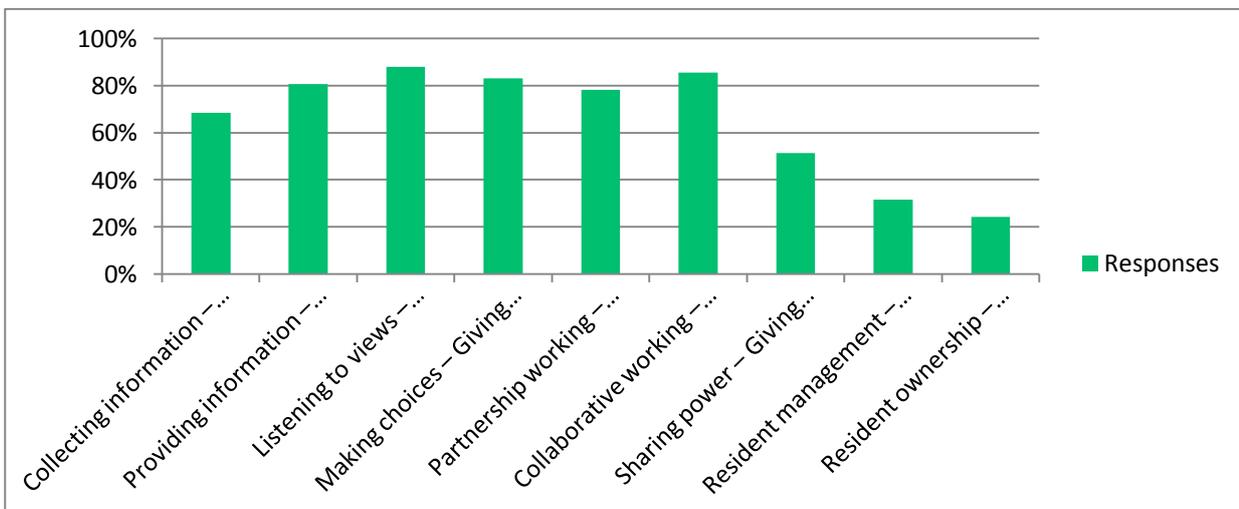
Senior execs



Staff directly involved in RI



Board members

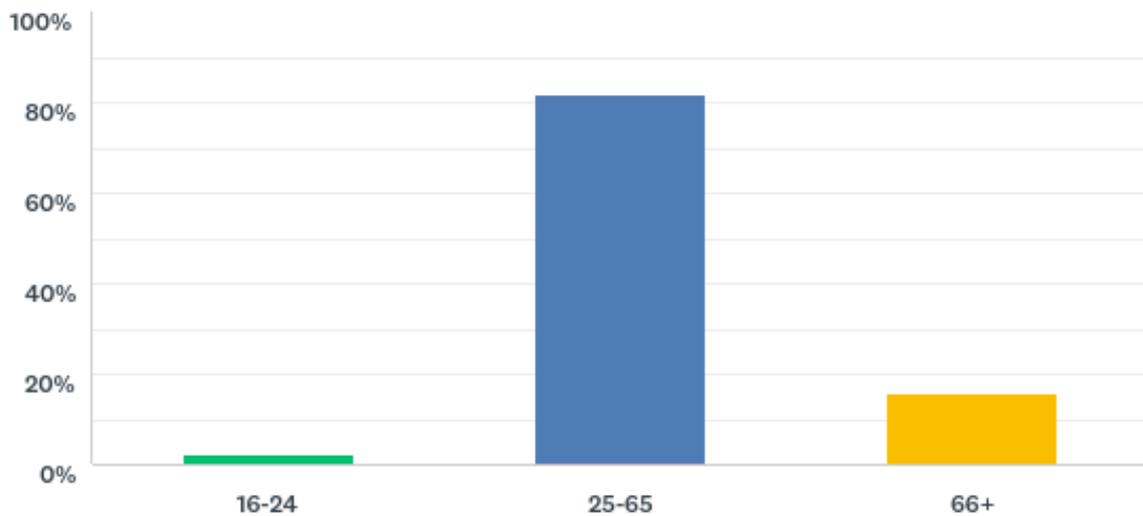


Only 11 other stakeholders completed the survey. They consisted of one person from each of: a TRA, development partner, local councillor, FIP, plus seven others.

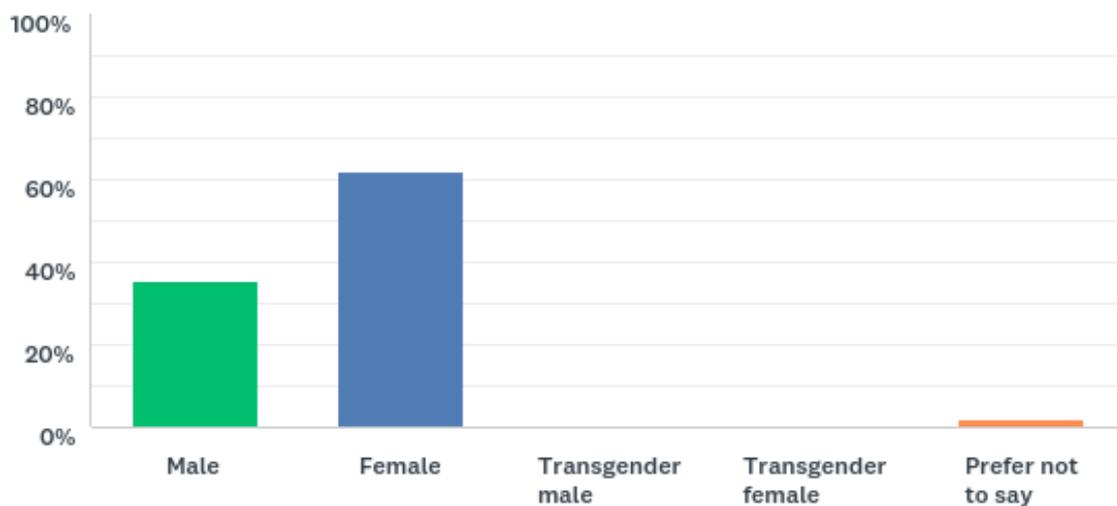
3.4. Equalities

We collected data on a number of protected characteristics. Taken for the sample as a whole, the results were:

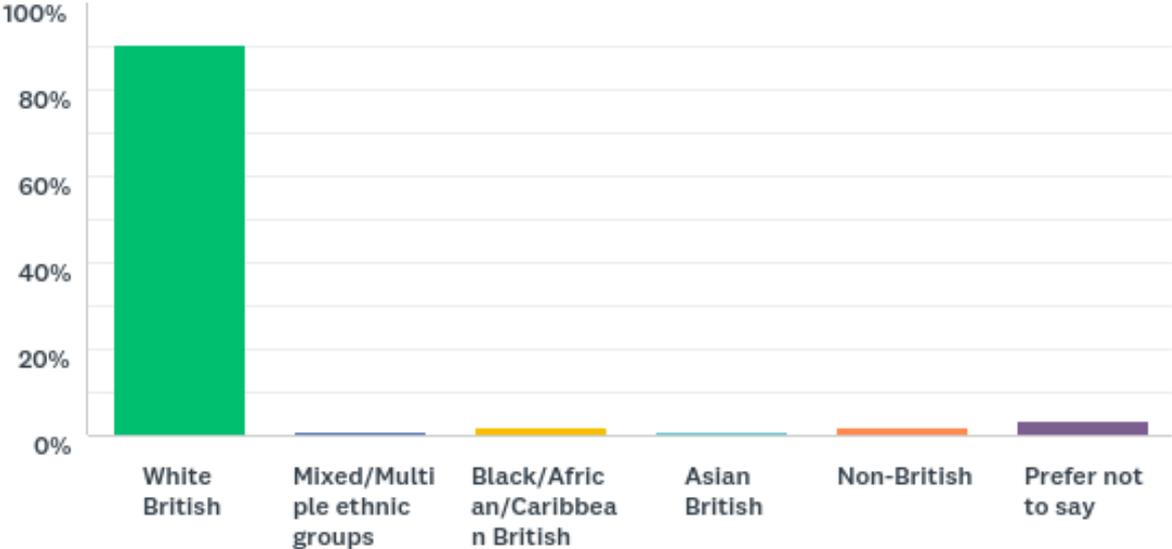
Q4 Your age bracket



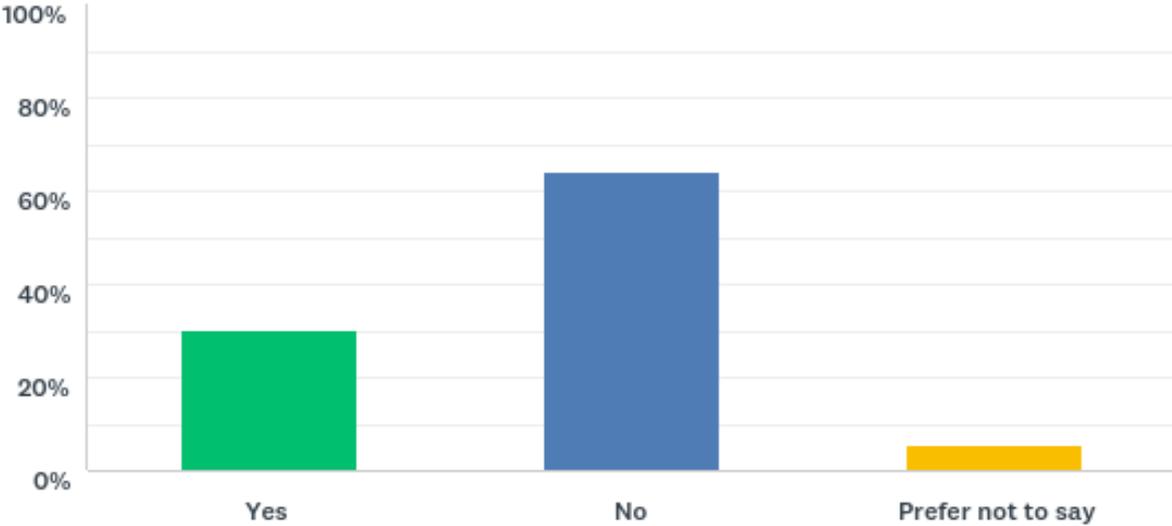
Q5 Your gender



Q6 Your ethnicity



Q7 Do you consider yourself to have a disability?



4 The focus groups

HQN organised separate meetings for tenants and residents from the SBS groups, in order to ensure tenants were able to speak freely. However, one person commented that they would have preferred a mixed group. In that spirit, this section combines the findings from both sets of participants.

The focus groups were offered summarised findings from the survey. Tenants were pleased to see that 'listening' was the top response to Q1/Q2 but there was strong feeling that listening alone was not enough. It has to be combined with outcome, action and feedback, they felt. One phrase that a lot of people liked was 'Listen, hear, act'. Participants from the SBS groups also found the survey results rang true.

'It's probably one of our lowest STAR⁶ indicators is in listening to tenants – we're actually good at listening but not at acting.' – SBS participant.

4.1. What sort of dialogue do you want?

Here residents were asked about the contact they currently have with their organisation. This ranged from a few hours per week or month to regular meetings that influence various levels of management and board decisions. Some were tenant inspectors, members of sub-committees to audit performance or offered voluntary hours. Some in the SBS groups were tenant board members. In the SBS group, one participant felt they should be available whenever tenants wanted to talk to them, 'day or night'.

“ Relationships developed by staff on the ground are key. Things can be resolved very quickly if people are empowered to act on whatever the issue at hand is at that particular time.”

'Listening' came up repeatedly, as noted above. Tenants wanted to be properly informed, and to have the chance to give their views, object if necessary, and have a genuinely open discussion.

'It's also about creating an environment where tenants feel comfortable enough to talk to us open and honestly. Frontline staff are very important to developing that trust.' – SBS participant.

As to purpose, one tenant said: 'Tenant participation should move the housing association towards collaboration and co-operation.' This seemed to be the way some SBS group participants saw the relationship too:

'Relationships developed by staff on the ground are key. Things can be resolved very quickly if people are empowered to act on whatever the issue at hand is at that particular time. Otherwise you end up with a very formal arrangement – visits every six months, appointments made through the website. It should be much more organic.' – SBS participant.

⁶ Survey of Tenants and Residents

And other SBS participants stressed the importance of building relationships to do a better job.

‘We can’t sit in our offices and dictate how we think their lives should be, so the more tenants you can get involved with the better.’ – SBS participant.

‘I think health and safety is paramount especially after Grenfell.’ – SBS participant.

One tenant felt a root and branch change was needed:

‘I’m trying to understand the idea behind tenant participation. We need a paradigm shift. A shift in brain processes. A unity. The brain in the board and management. And tenants are at the heart. And the brain and the heart have become disconnected. You’re looking for a shift in thought processes.’
– Tenant participant.

“We need a paradigm shift. A shift in brain processes. A unity.”

For others it was more straightforward:

‘Tenants want effective dialogue, with honest communication to know what is happening.’
– Tenant participant.

‘It really all comes down to sustaining the tenancy. People want to feel happy and safe in their homes. It’s about assurance.’ – SBS participant.

Some SBS group participants raised a problem familiar from previous studies (eg, Pawson et al, 2012) that it can be difficult to engage with some tenants and residents, who either find it difficult or do not currently want to be involved; though both this group and the tenants recognised the importance of finding ways to reach out to all tenants and residents. They emphasised the need for choices of approaches and channels to communicate, particularly in rural areas. Speed of response was also mentioned by both groups of participants. This was seen as both a marker of an organisation that is performing well, and of a trustworthy organisation. SBS group participants recognised the need to deliver within a reasonable timeframe or lose tenants’ and residents’ goodwill.

‘Dialogue would go well if staff were reactive to problems – dialogue would be very useful if you could solve the problem rapidly enough’ – SBS participant.

4.2. Is it about trust and respect?

Here the discussion moved into a series of related issues of openness, power, accountability and above all dialogue. Notions of trust and respect are fundamentally about the culture of an organisation, and this part of the focus groups attempted to identify cultural touchstones for tenants.

One tenant said: ‘Housing associations are there to serve their tenants, but it never feels like that. They need to show they are in the caring business – they forget that they are supposed to be there for their residents. Nowadays, they are only interested in running a

business.’ Another asked a key question as to whether housing associations exist only to build and look after the homes, or whether they have a responsibility to communities as well.

For some tenants, the issues were practical – allocations, anti-social behaviour, repairs. SBS participants were keener to ensure they shared the basics of explaining the income and outgoings of the association:

‘We don’t communicate well enough on things like rent setting. It’s one of those things that I’m sure helps to nurture mistrust. There are always going to be different views on how the money is spent and what the priorities are, but surely it’s better to inform tenants about the decisions that are being taken. There may not always be visible benefits to some of the investment projects but I’m sure if people realised that thousands were being spent on the safety of buildings, it would be respected.’ – SBS participant.

‘Some housing association directors already give tenant participation groups a full explanation of changing services and service charges.’ – Tenant participant.

For most tenants the pressing need came back to ‘people skills’ (and this also often lay behind the practical issues). Lack of openness, feeling that information has been withheld or access to senior people blocked was a recurring theme. ‘If only they’d come back and tell us why they couldn’t do something rather than leaving us in the dark,’ said one.

‘Openness and transparency is not a strong point for the sector, but it would go a long way. Withholding of information from tenants happens far too often.’ – Tenant participant.

‘They’ve a bank of people answering the phones as a defence for people higher up.’ – Tenant participant.

‘We’ve done a deep dive on trust and it’s very much linked to maintenance. If you have an appointment and you don’t turn up, trust goes.’ – SBS participant.

On the other hand, some gave examples of initiatives where proper communication had brought positive results – and saved money. Tenants were concerned not so much about the money directly but about avoiding wastage of effort and resources; and the cultural values that lie behind actions.

‘Three tenants sat down with three directors – the conversation led to a complete rethink and saved £470,000 a year.’ – Tenant participant.

There was some discussion in the tenant groups of structures to facilitate engagement, though this was limited. One SBS participant warned that structure remains important, even when people skills are to the fore. And the familiar question of whether to have specialist tenant and resident involvement teams or make involvement ‘everyone’s job’ was discussed.

‘I take all of this on board but conversations with residents also have to be consistent and not done in an ad hoc way, otherwise it can be a cause of rumour and gossip. I also

sometimes think that we over-consult with residents and they suffer death by survey. “Just get on with the job”.’ – SBS participant.

4.3. Is the relationship working?

Tenants said there was a fundamental difference to their situation, that they felt staff did not always understand. One said: ‘Many HA staff are homeowners – their mindset is totally different to tenants. They treat it as a job – they don’t understand how we feel.’ Some SBS group participants pointed to practical difficulties and the need to work harder at engaging tenants, particularly with ‘scattered’ stock or in large organisations.

“Be honest. Don’t leave us in the dark like mushrooms.”

The discussion turned again to cultural ideas about listening and respect. ‘There is an assumption by staff that we don’t know what we’re talking about, so they’re listening but they’re not hearing because they’re assuming we don’t know what we’re talking about, so we’ll do it our way.’ On the other hand, one participant gave an encouraging comment: ‘They are visibly trying to improve.’ SBS participants did, it should be said, share the same wishes for mutual respect and collaboration and offer reflective comments on issues of communication.

There was discussion in both groups around perceptions about culture in different types of organisation. Some felt local authorities were less respectful to tenants than were housing associations, while others thought it was the opposite way round. These perceptions seemed to come from individual experiences, and there was mention of ‘bad apples’ about both tenants (said by a tenant) and staff (said by an SBS group participant), though this notion was also challenged. One SBS participant stressed the need to create a positive culture that also included contractors, surveyors and others working on behalf of the organisation.

On how trust could be built, several tenants put forward ideas – ones that relate back to the terms found in the word cloud.

‘Be open with the truth. Don’t say “this has to be done” – tell us why it has to be done.’ – Tenant participant.

‘We’ll never get rid of ‘them’ and ‘us’, but we could change that through more transparency, honesty and collaboration.’ – Tenant participant.

The simple idea of talking – ‘upfront rather than when problems occur’ – was much favoured, and this loops back again to the issue of culture. ‘We should be able to talk to the landlord whenever we like,’ said one person. Freedom to discuss all topics, whether within involvement structures or otherwise, was called for. The idea of getting the housing association listening, however, was not seen as a passive activity: tenants wanted to

“You know when a landlord is listening because you can see the results.”

know that the association was first going to respond, and then more widely going to learn so as not to go back to the same issues again. So, the motto should perhaps be 'Listen, act, learn'.

This important point relates directly to the question posed by the Regulatory Board: 'How do we really know tenant engagement works?' There was little support for NHS-style 'friends and family' or similar tests, though one organisation had successfully used a 'net promoter score', a means of gauging how likely people are to recommend your services. One tenant suggested that having tenants ask other tenants the questions would produce more honest answers: a case for forms of peer review, perhaps?

'A return to the one-to-one relationships built up between staff and tenants would be good – but give the staff more freedom and responsibility to talk openly.' – Tenant participant.

'Individual relationships keep being highlighted as an important factor. Building on this, co-production can make a huge difference. Allowing communities to help co-produce their services has so many benefits.' – SBS participant.

'What's the saying? "Listening to learn rather than listening to respond". I think that's important.' – SBS participant.

Organisational culture was again recognised as critical; and within this, there was a reminder about fairness in reaching and listening to *all* tenants and residents.

'We're definitely aware that tenants do sometimes think their tenancies will be adversely affected if they criticise their landlord. But equally, others think those that shout loudest get the quickest response/most attention.' – SBS participant.

There was a good measure of self-awareness in the SBS groups, with evidence that housing organisations do try to learn ... but sometimes something gets in the way:

"The key to building trust and respect is setting the right culture – from top to bottom. Chief execs are incredibly influential."

'Tenants just want us to do what we say we're going to do. Why do we have to get the basics wrong so often? We're unpicking the legacy of a well-meaning regeneration project that wasn't connected to the rest of the business. We failed to deliver it as we should have, and it has created a culture of mistrust that we're still tackling today.' – SBS participant

4.4. Do tenants want to be in control?

Tenants pointed out the fact that they have little or no choice of landlord, and therefore are in a weak position relative to the housing association. So it might be thought that a structure in which tenants hold positions of power might be favoured, but this was not generally the case. One participant called for tenants to be not empowered but 'we need to embolden ourselves'. This is a telling phrase, suggesting that particular structures may not deliver the desired results

"I shop at Tesco, but I don't want to run it."

but a cultural change among tenants to gain influence with their housing associations – and thereby change the associations’ culture – might.

However, one SBS participant felt wider social norms were to blame for the power imbalance.

‘(It) is not just a social housing problem, it’s a wider issue in society. Schools, workplaces – you could call it part of the British condition.’

Tenants gave a variety of reasons for not thinking resident control was an answer, from mistrusting the true value of a place on the board to wanting to leave the professionals to do the job.

‘It’s only a little thing but I notice on board papers that they differentiate between normal board members and tenant board members. It’s quite telling.’ – Tenant participant.

‘Tenants as board members are restricted; either the tenant supports tenants or the board, no leeway for independence creating a conflict of interest.’ – Tenant participant.

‘The decisions that need to be taken; you need to have a much-broader knowledge than we would be prepared to take in. We will see things more from our point of view. They have training, experience and knowledge that goes beyond that. We have to trust them to make the right decisions on our behalf for areas we’re not versed in, but they have to trust us.’

‘Tenants want to be part of the committees not wading through documentation filled with jargon.’ – Tenant participant.

‘We don’t have the depth of knowledge.’ – Tenant participant.

‘I shop at Tesco, but I don’t want to run it – I’ve got enough to do in my own life.’ – SBS participant.

‘There’s no strong desire among tenants to run the business: they want to know there’s a competent team in charge. That’s what they pay us for: you’re the professionals, run the business. If there’s something wrong in their home, fix it. Don’t fob them off with “it’s not in the policy”. If it’s not in the policy, change the policy.’ – SBS participant.

Even so, as with the survey there was some support for tenant control via mutual or co-ops. One participant explained the accountability it can offer:

‘With the mutual approach, we can hold the board to account. We can even Facetime the chair during our meetings to ask questions direct if we like.’ – Tenant participant.

One participant suggested chief executives should be voted in by tenants. Noting the weakness of tenants’ position with regard to their housing associations, some people commented on the situation of the regulator and central government.

‘We can’t choose to go somewhere else if the service isn’t good enough – that’s why it needs regulating. And the regulator needs to understand that we need to be heard too. From what I understand, since the ONS change the regulator is more interested in the financial viability of the company. Tenant issues are, particularly in the first Welsh Government publication, pushed to the side. The regulator is yet to find its teeth.’ – Tenant participant.

‘We see the regulator as the link between tenants, board and staff so I wonder if the tenant voice should become an official part of the regulatory judgement. Or maybe the Performance Standard should be beefed up and include elements such as resident involvement?’ – Tenant participant.

‘Personally, I would like to see less recommendations and more directives from the regulator.’ – Tenant participant.

‘Without the Welsh Assembly investing in something, we’re going to have a load of residents who are disenfranchised. Is it fair that the housing association or the low-paid individuals fork out money to help others?’ – SBS participant.

4.5. Mind the gaps!

In this part of the focus groups we tried to ascertain how far along the tenant involvement journey people felt we are now, and how far there is still to go. Participants were asked to complete a spider graph (see next section for results) and there was discussion as well. Some tenants expressed a feeling that the relationship is difficult, and power very unbalanced. A few felt some staff had a negative perception of tenants that needed to change.

“They need to do what they say they will.”

‘I don’t think tenants have had a voice for a long time. We don’t know what to do with it.’ – Tenant participant.

‘There are tenants who don’t want to complain about their landlord for fear of being evicted. That’s a terrible situation to be in.’ – Tenant participant.

Others felt it was more a case of, as noted in The Right Stuff, performance and assurance: keeping promises made to tenants and residents:

‘Trust needs to be earned – without it you don’t get the respect.’ – Tenant participant.

And to complete the picture, other tenants felt their association was doing a good job, or at least overtly working to improve relationships with tenants and residents. SBS group discussions also produced positive examples in co-designing the use of space in new developments and services; and in tackling ASB.

“We should be able to ‘work mutually’ without necessarily being a mutual – it’s more of a mindset.”

‘(Association) achieve this goal due to close knit communities and localities.’ – Tenant participant.

‘Communication can go a long way to improving the relationship but has to be honest dialogue.’ – Tenant participant.

Nor is there only a single gap. Beyond the housing association/tenant relationship there were mentions of rents (Welsh Government), planning (local councils), service charges (improvements including for health and safety can bring higher costs) and allocations.

4.6. The language – what words do you prefer?

Recognising that language is important, we asked participants what terms they preferred from the various choices of tenant; customer; resident; or engagement; participation; involvement. This part of the study became somewhat reminiscent of George Bernard Shaw’s comment on ‘two countries separated by a common language’.

One association has decided tenants are to be known as ‘contract holders’ or ‘home holders’. Most tenants preferred to be called a ‘tenant’. But this was not shared by all SBS participants.

‘I feel the term tenant needs to be reclaimed. We should feel proud to be tenants, but the term has been stigmatised. It’s great to hear it being used today in such a positive way.’ – Tenant participant.

‘Residents, residents, residents – it covers people living in all tenures – not all residents are tenants, so we do need to be accurate.’ – SBS participant.

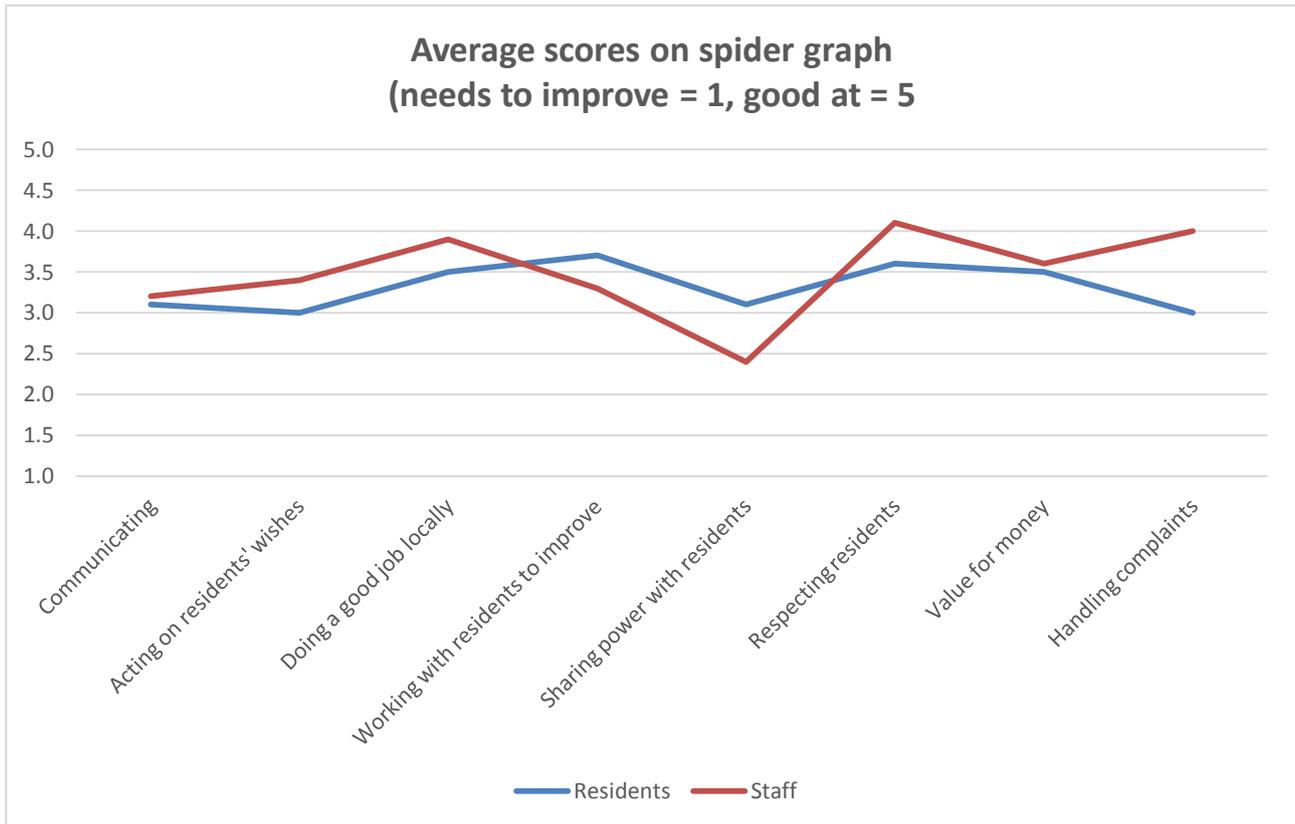
Some tenants disliked the term ‘landlord’, because of its associations with either feudalism or Rachmanism.

‘Involvement’ was preferred by some tenants, as was ‘tenant voice’. An SBS participant said ‘relationship’ is the key word.

However, there were warnings from tenants against being too preoccupied with terms, with its implications of navel gazing. ‘A waste of time and resources,’ one said. While another asked - ‘Why don’t you just call me by my name?’

5 The spider graphs

Tenants and staff/board members/stakeholders at the focus groups were asked to complete a spider graph while they were present, with guidance from the facilitators. The results have been compiled into a numeric table of average (mean) scores, with five as ‘my organisation is good at’ and one as ‘my organisation needs to improve at’.



As can be seen, the two groups in the study averaged somewhat different scores, though generally fairly high. This suggests both groups think their organisation is doing quite a good job on most of the given topics, though with some clear differences. Both groups scored their organisations lower on ‘sharing power with residents’, particularly the staff/board/stakeholder group. ‘Acting on residents’ wishes’ and ‘handling complaints’ also scored lower with residents, though not with staff.

For a fuller picture it is illuminating to consider the scores for each group in more detail. Looking at the individual scores for each item for each group, it is apparent that there is a much greater spread of scores among the tenant and resident group. These range from some giving the lowest ratings (all ones or ones and twos) to some giving top marks all round. In contrast in the staff/board/stakeholder group, although there were occasional one or five ratings, the great majority were clustered around the three to four rating, except on ‘sharing power’ where there were also a number of two ratings. In other words, the spread of ratings was narrower among this group.

6 Conclusions: what we learnt from the study

Nine years ago we at HQN reported that ‘the personal approach that gives a large organisation a human face has not been bettered’ when it comes to stimulating tenant and resident involvement (Pawson et al, *ibid*). The current study bears out that point once again.

“The personal approach that gives a large organisation a human face has not been bettered.”

6.1. Dialogue and engagement – the importance of human relationships

The weight of survey and focus group responses suggests that many people want types of tenant and resident involvement that are about dialogue and engagement between residents and staff/board. The two-way nature of this means ideas about personal contact, talking and listening must be explored, as well as all other feasible communication methods. Are there, for example, implications here for the ‘channel shift’ and VfM agendas that could imply less personal contact between landlord and tenant? Our study suggests that while IT can offer additional ‘strings to the bow’ on resident involvement, and is fundamental to delivering good services, it cannot replace the all-important idea of human relationships in building trust. The strong demand for digital access in new homes reported in the Independent Review of Affordable Housing Supply (Welsh Government, 2019), incidentally, suggests that preference for the human touch does not stem from any anti-technology sentiment.

Basic tasks such as rent collection and repairs ordering might initially be seen as straightforward, and therefore separate from broader dialogue. But our research suggests that would be a mistake: they are part of the process of building trust, and tenants and residents in part judge the level of respect they are receiving by how well the association performs on these day-to-day tasks. Much may be initially automated but especially when things have gone wrong, change is happening, or there is information to share, people skills come to the fore. It is clear from the focus groups that day-to-day matters are the main times when tenants and residents come into contact with the association, so it is important that the approach to delivering these services reflects a commitment to the qualities of resident involvement.

6.2. Speed and ease of dialogue

The most popular response to Q1/Q2 in the survey, ‘listening’, included an element about speed and ease of dialogue and response. This was also mentioned in the focus groups. It is an important aspect of the landlord and tenant relationship, one that embodies ideas about trust and good communication. It could be argued that fast responses are part of the general demand for speed from consumers of all kinds, together with a growing expectation that our digital future should deliver this. That would be equally true in landlord/tenant relationships; but the responses also suggest an appetite to build trust by knowing/seeing that action is being taken swiftly when needed.

6.3. The quality of listening

This brings us to the quality of that listening. Of itself, participants said, it is necessary but not enough. It must be accompanied by a quality of taking on board what is said, being seen to respond to it, and then to learn from it.

Many of the focus group tenant participants were already serving their organisation in various voluntary capacities; and some SBS participants were board members (including tenant board members). Others in the survey were likely to be less involved, or perhaps not involved at all. Participants stressed that it is important to reach all residents – so they wanted open kinds of dialogue according to what suits individuals best.

Throughout the study there was a strong emphasis from all groups on soft skills and outcomes. So, in looking at the question of the purpose of resident involvement, words that come up frequently are about sharing, talking, listening, honesty, trust and mutual respect. Although a few residents (and some staff/board members) mentioned 'power' or 'empowerment', most did not. The comment offered by one tenant that the need was to 'embolden ourselves' seems nearer the mark: tenants and residents demanding respect and receiving it came across as a key point. That is not to place the burden on individuals: rather, the onus must be on housing organisations to create the conditions in which tenants and residents feel able to express their wishes and be heard.

We can argue therefore that resident involvement is there not primarily to bring about specific practical outcomes but to engender a relationship of mutual trust, built through honest dialogue and respect. Practical outcomes, such as improved services, less waste or more successful regeneration projects, would undoubtedly flow from that relationship, and they could be seen as happy consequences of something more nebulous yet fundamental and necessary.

6.4. *The culture of organisations*

Does that suggest tenants and residents broadly do not see reliance on or obtaining specific powers or structures as an answer? Certainly, a strong message coming over is about the culture of organisations: the repeated references to authenticity, genuineness, commitment and honesty suggest that residents and professionals alike want to see organisations being open to dialogue, committed to it, and committed to making the changes that residents feel are needed. That will involve some power sharing and compromise. The need for specific structures cannot be discounted: associations will still have to decide on what frameworks and responsibilities will best embrace, embed and promote resident involvement, and as one SBS participant noted, frameworks within which to conduct dialogue and take action will underpin the work.

6.5. *The journey and the process*

The journey to get there seems to be in a symbiotic relationship with the outcome: talking, sharing, respecting and acting on what is learnt. Not only that, it could be said that if a relationship of trust is the desired outcome, the points on the journey can be markers of such a relationship: if there is openness and dialogue, a relationship of trust is likely to be developing or in place.

All of this amounts to a process of building a culture within the organisation where the relationship of trust and respect is embedded at every level. Participants talked of the need for leadership, and also the negative effects that one disrespectful member of staff or contractor can have. People also looked to the regulator and government to support and underpin the creation of the right culture across the sector.

6.6. *Would tenant management or ownership be the natural outcome of strong resident involvement?*

We explored this question in our study. The nine options on the survey, where participants could tick as many as they wanted, had these two possibilities as the final ones in the list. The options bear a resemblance to Arnstein's famous ladder of citizen participation (Arnstein,1969), with an important difference: instead of a ladder in which the last two options are at the top (the most aspirational), our options were seen as a continuum in which any combinations were possible. Both the survey and the focus groups confirmed that management and ownership are currently favoured by only a minority of tenants and residents. In fact, for some, the idea of having a relationship of trust and respect with the housing association seemed to imply that the professionals could or should be expected to do the job of management. As one person said, it is a case of mutual working without necessarily being a mutual.

6.7. *A question posed by the Regulatory Board governing this study was: How do we really know resident involvement works?*

One simple measure is by how happy people are with the services they receive, and how often they feel a need to complain. Services that are disconnected from the reality of people's lives, delivered impersonally and perhaps badly, are not likely to score well. But our study found a wariness about specific measures such as satisfaction surveys or 'friends and family' tests.

One tenant gave a straightforward response: 'You know when a landlord is listening because you can see the results.' That can of course mean a direct result in, for example, right-first-time services. Or it could mean results in terms of better communities and tenants feeling valued. So, the problematic nature of measuring outcomes remains apparent – yet clearly there will be a need to monitor and try to establish what techniques, activities, skill-building and structures work.

To get a better fix on this concept of knowing what works and what people aspire to, our study tried to get an idea of where people think we currently are on the journey to that relationship of trust and respect, and how far we have yet to travel. Despite many difficulties in the relationship being voiced in the focus groups, the spider graphs completed at the end of the focus groups revealed that people generally thought their organisations were doing fairly well on the mix of practical (complaints, etc) and qualitative (respect) issues.

Within those averages, however, lay both the extremes of praise and brickbats. People can only respond to the experiences they have had, so these figures perhaps reflect a currently variable nature of resident involvement work – and service quality – as well as subjective expectations. If organisations work on the issue of top-to-bottom culture change in their organisation, we might see results of this type evening out in the upper parts of the scale. This would go a long way toward finding ways to pin down that elusive 'how do we know it works' question.

7 Listen, act, learn: Hearing the tenants' and residents' voice

We've distilled down from our study responses the approach that organisations need to take for successful tenant and resident involvement to three key points:

- 1 Actively listen to what your tenants and residents are saying to you, take action on what is said, and learn – be ready to change.
- 2 Work to create a culture of respect, at all levels of the organisation, to enable you to build a relationship of trust with tenants and residents.
- 3 Monitor your progress in building a relationship of trust with tenants and residents, develop techniques for measuring success, and feed back the findings into further improvement.

We have constructed a word wheel chart with key points from our study, to help organisations, tenants and residents work on the task of building a sound relationship of trust. We hope that by paying attention to every point on the wheel, organisations will improve their resident involvement approach, and tenants and residents will feel that they are indeed actively listened to. The chart can be used alongside the Vision of Good Governance from The Right Stuff (Regulatory Board for Wales, 2018).

Successful resident involvement wheel chart



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Appendix one: survey questionnaire for residents

Tenants at the heart – Regulatory Board for Wales review

Introduction

We are undertaking this short, independent survey about resident involvement in Wales on behalf of Welsh Government. Resident involvement is the term generally used to describe how residents can influence their landlord's services and decisions. This is part of a review considering how to ensure that tenants are at the heart of regulation in Wales. We want to get back to fundamental principles and find out what involvement is actually aiming to achieve. Above all, we want to find out what you think resident involvement should seek to achieve. Resident involvement has many faces and many names, such as involvement/engagement/participation with customers/service users/tenants/citizens. The words we use are significant, so, as part of the review, we want to find out what you think are the best terms and definitions to use moving forward.

What should resident involvement be aiming to achieve now and in the future? Tick all the items that apply

- Collecting information** – Helping to ensure that services work better for you by collecting information about residents.
- Providing information** – Giving you the information you need on how well your landlord is doing (such as on the quality of services, value for money, and safety) by providing open and honest reports.
- Listening to views** – Giving you quick and easy ways to tell your landlord about what you want and need – for yourself, the neighbourhood and the community.
- Making choices** – Giving you real choices about your home and neighbourhood, and what services cost.
- Partnership working** – Providing opportunities to work in partnership with your landlord to change and improve services.
- Collaborative working** – Landlords and residents working together in collaborative projects to co-design services and make decisions.
- Sharing power** – Giving residents and the landlord an equal say, now and for the future, by sharing power within in a community organisation.
- Resident management** – Where residents want to, handing over the management of certain estates or services, like repairs, to you the residents.
- Resident ownership** – Giving residents ownership of the landlord so that you can run it yourselves (either directly or through a housing organisation you choose.)

Summarising using only a few words (2-3 preferably), what is the key ingredient for successful resident involvement?

Please tell us some details about yourself. Your personal information will only be used for this survey. We will not pass on your details to anyone else.

Your age bracket

- 16-24 25-65 66+

Your gender

- Male Female Transgender Male
- Transgender Female Prefer not to say

Your ethnicity

- White British Mixed/Multiple ethnic groups Black/African/Caribbean British
- Asian British Non-British Prefer not to say

Other ethnic group:

Do you consider yourself to have a disability?

- Yes No Prefer not to say

Are you a...

- Tenant Leaseholder Shared owner
- Tenant in a mutual/co-op

Other:

Are you living in:

- General housing Housing specially for older people
- Special types of housing such as supported/independent living, refuge, FIP, etc

Are you a...

- Tenant/resident Non-resident board member

Other:

Is yours a...

- Large organisation Medium organisation Small organisation
- A co-op/mutual

Does your organisation mainly offer:

- General housing Housing for older people Supported/independent living

Does your organisation have housing mainly in.

Towns/Cities Rural areas/villages

May we contact you to invite you to take part in a focus group about resident involvement?

Name:

Which organisation/housing provider are you a tenant of?:

Phone number:

Email:

Prefer to attend in:

North Wales South Wales West Wales

Appendix two: focus group topics

What sort of dialogue do you want?

So we know that residents and landlords want to have a dialogue with each other. What kind of discussion should that be? What should it aim to achieve?

- How often do you want to talk to your landlord/residents?
- Is that conversation mainly about practical things, or are there other things you want to talk about? (examples, explore safety)
- There were many comments in the survey about listening. How do you know when your landlord has listened to what you've said? (Staff/board) Do you think your organisation is good at listening? What does that mean in practice?

Is it about trust and respect?

(Using the word cloud)

The survey results strongly favour the idea of building a relationship, with trust and respect.

Do these words resonate with you? Which ones – why?

How can we build a relationship between residents and landlords that respects each of them?

- How can we build trust? Do we have that now, or is there something missing that hampers trust?
- Do we need to find ways to share power, in order to build trust? What ways might those be?

Is the relationship working?

How might we know how well a housing association is doing at resident involvement, based on a relationship of trust? Do we need particular structures to be built in to ensure organisations do what they should on resident involvement? Or is what's really needed something to do with 'soft skills'?

- Explore PIs, friends & family type tests
- How do we assess the strength of 'people skills'
- Explore whether collective structures – committees, resident board members, etc, are favoured.

Fundamentally, how do we know what really works in resident involvement?

Do tenants want to be in control?

The survey found less support for residents managing or taking ownership of either their estate or the whole organisation, though a decent number did think that's the way to go.

- If you don't want to go down that route, why is that? (Explore idea of taking on responsibility, respect for professionals, just wanting the organisation to do a good job (limits), not necessary to achieve good relations, etc)
- If you do, what could be achieved that doesn't work so well in traditional HAs? Do you think more residents would need to step forward and share the work?
- Explore whole question of power – do we need to change the balance of power between residents and landlords? Do residents need to be 'empowered'? What would the aim of that empowerment be?

Mind the gap!

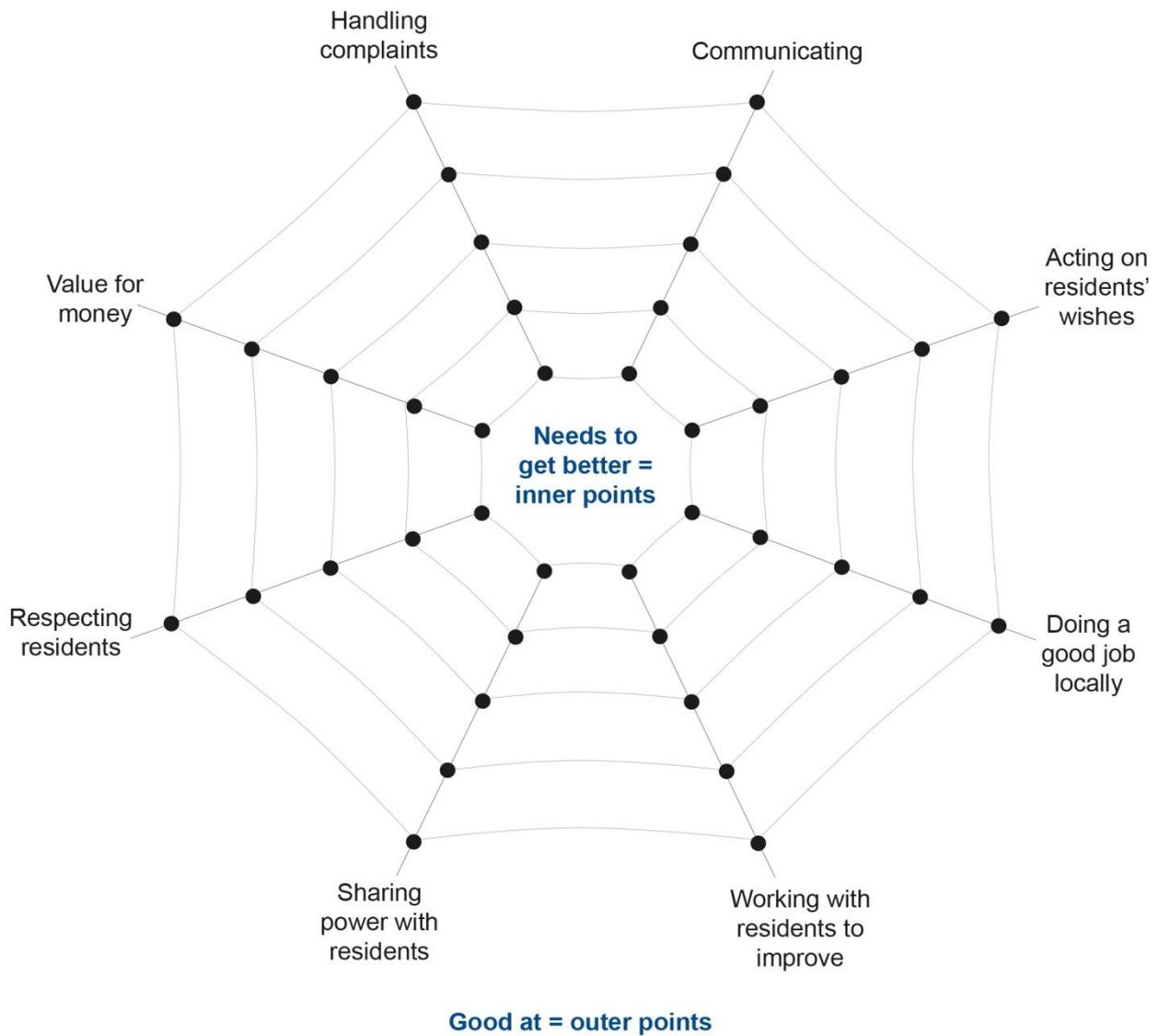
In some organisations at least there is a gap between what residents/staff/board members want in resident involvement, and where we are today.

- In your own organisation, how wide is the gap?
- Where your organisation needs to do more, what would be the first step?
- Where people are generally satisfied, what works well? (examples).

The language – what words do you prefer?

Appendix three: spider graph used in focus groups

My organisation is good at/needs to get better at.....



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