The Democratic Society

Better democracy, everywhere

Improving Democratic
Engagement in the
Housing Sector

Democracy
Starts at Home

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The Democratic Society

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Foreword

Kevin Stewart MSP, Minister for Local Government, Housing and Planning

Housing associations are at the very centre of communities and close to the people they serve. But like other organisations they recognise that the traditional forms of engaging tenants and residents no longer suit everyone. Historically some people have been disconnected. Younger people in particular are harder to involve in committees and formal forums, but they still have a real interest in terms of services they receive. While digital exclusion still remains a factor in disadvantaged communities, more people are increasingly online, that presents real opportunities to do things in new and different ways.

The research, commissioned by Wheatley Group, was aimed at gathering the very best examples of customer engagement from across the world to help point the way forward. The benefit of giving people a voice and working with them is that it leads to better services and stronger, more confident communities. Tenant participation/resident engagement is well developed in Scotland and is based on transparency, mutual respect, partnership and trust. Our legislation, regulatory system and the Scottish Social Housing Charter all combine to ensure that social housing tenants get clear information on the services they receive and have the opportunity to get involved in their landlords decision making.

Housing providers are ideally placed to empower communities, they connect with a range of local agencies, partners, community groups and projects, professionals and people, so they can bring people together and encourage communities to get things done. Because of their close relationship with residents and capacity to build trust, they are also well placed to not only give advice and support but help people build their skills and find their voice on issues that are important to them. We are in a very strong and unique position in Scotland in that engagement and empowering of tenants and residents are at the heart of Scottish Government housing policy.

What comes across loud and clear in this report is that engagement must be genuine. True engagement is not just about solving issues for people but about working collaboratively with people to deliver change. This is what the report describes as moving from consultation to co-creation. It points to fresh approaches, tools and techniques with examples given from across the world.

The universal requirement is that an organisation must be willing and able to act upon what is said.

I therefore welcome this research and thank Wheatley and CIH for commissioning it, and the Democratic Society for carrying it out.

I hope it will stimulate discussion and re-energise thinking on how we engage with people. The examples discussed in the report expand the choices that housing professionals have and offer useful tools to support more effective engagement that builds on existing work.

Martin Armstrong, Chief Executive of Wheatley Group

At Wheatley, we have a strong track record of community engagement and putting customers' voices at the heart of our decision-making.

However, as we look to the future through the lens of an increasingly digital world, there is an ongoing responsibility to review and renew how and with what purpose we engage the tenants, factored homeowners and the people we work for in care as we set about fulfilling the Wheatley mission, "Better Homes, Better Lives".

In commissioning The Democratic Society to undertake this research, we were determined not just to "think outside the box", but to capture best practice and new thinking from around the world. It was important, in our minds, to go beyond the housing and care sectors and to seek out and learn from what is happening across all public and private sectors.

The goal was to define and develop a new relationship with customers, shifting the balance of power from executive command and control to decision making by communities, families and individuals. And to do this by encouraging customers to become more closely involved in the decisions taken about their homes and the services they receive, as well as the programmes and activities aimed at providing them with "Better Lives".

The aim is to help people build new skills and confidence, to better engage and empower them to make things happen for themselves, and in the process creating and supporting stronger, more resilient communities.

The Democratic Society's work and contributions were drawn from California to London, Gothenburg to Minnesota, from Leith to Glasgow. It involved organisations and institutions ranging from Stanford University to the respected think tank RSA and the International Association of Public Participation USA. Crucially, it engaged the real experts: social housing and mid-market tenants, the people we work for in care and factored homeowners. They all had their say.

The resulting report throws a new light on the relationship organisations like Wheatley strive to develop with their customers. Our objective was to disregard conventional hypothesis and unwind stereotypical approaches. Fresh, new engagement approaches, tools and techniques are explored and international case studies showcased.

At the very least, I am confident it will stimulate discussion and debate and, hopefully, inspire us all to put customers at the heart of all we do on their behalf, recognising meaningful engagement as a mainstream priority, not an optional extra. Good engagement is good business. By truly listening and responding to them, we will create not only excellent products and services, but establish outstanding levels of customer satisfaction.

Scotland is the home of this research, but I hope organisations across the rest of the UK find it relevant and useful as they consider their response to the Hackitt Report's call for residents' voices to be strengthened and for their involvement and engagement to be at the heart of a culture change in the relationship between landlords and residents. Certainly, here at Wheatley it will guide us on our onward, never-ending journey to customer-service excellence.

Executive Summary

Respect and dignity are essential for society. As people we need them to live well ourselves, to treat our neighbours, our friends and our families as we want to be treated – and to fundamentally do better by others. This is no more critical than in the choices we make about our housing.

Across Scotland, almost a quarter of all households live in social housing, and Wheatley Group, Scotland's largest provider of social housing provides accommodation for over 50,000 households. This report is designed to help make that an even better experience for both residents and the staff who work in the housing sector, helping to ensure that housing organisations and residents can work together to create services that are more valuable, to develop more connected and resilient communities, and ensure a more meaningful lived experience for all.

The question for the housing sector is how best to involve customers – how best to hear their voices and act upon what is heard. This involves empowering people to shape decisions rather than inviting them to respond to a set agenda and requires developing new ways of engaging that draw in those who have historically felt disconnected.

This report suggests several actions and activities that help do exactly this, leading to better decision making. These activities include:

• Giving residents direct powers in choosing how and where money is spent;

• Using online and offline approaches to make it easy for customers to share their priorities;

• Co-producing services with residents, and implementing changes iteratively;

• Focusing on access: sharing information early and making it easier to attend meetings;

• Creating opportunities for deliberation and discussion;

• Adopting apps and new technology.

The report emphasises that resident engagement must be genuine, and it must be acted upon, with residents having a real opportunity to influence the outcomes of key decisions and policies. It must move beyond the traditional processes for responding to specific concerns when a customer raises an issue, and instead focus on changing relationships and building trust. Trust evolves for housing providers and for residents through working together, seeing what can be achieved together, and implementing changes that may otherwise never have been realised.

That happens by involving customers throughout the design and implementation of services, moving from simply consulting to actually co-creating solutions with them – and that means working with tenants from the start to develop realistic plans informed by their experiences, priorities and ideas. These activities cannot simply be about asking for input on plans that are already shaped or close to finalisation.

Finally, this report recommends four major priority areas. First, **easy sharing**. To engage people well, barriers to information and to the data that informs decision making must be removed. All organisations have them, but with the advent of better technology and a more open culture, information can be used to empower not control residents.

Second, **rapid reaction**. In the housing environment, engaging and talking to people is not enough to maintain trust. What works best is a fast, effective response to the questions and requests made – proving the credibility of open engagement with visible reactions. Focus on the micro and build up.

Third, **customer empathy**. It is too easy to only look at the blockages and the problems in sorting out customer complaints. To truly change the dialogue and the quality of engagement, prioritising empathy is critical – frank and fast conversations that deal with the immediate issues will have greater impact on trust than having more abstract, organisational conversations.

Fourth, **be an enabler, not a disabler**. Shifting the balance of power and control is really about giving direct power to decide how things work. Creating a community that generates ideas and projects, discusses these suggestions and then decides together what happens next is fundamentally liberating for customers and gets better results for everyone.

There is no magic bullet to improving engagement in the housing sector – but what this report sets out is a chain of actions that can combine to amend the quality of engagement between residents and housing providers – and to create new ways of making decisions with residents, ensuring that democracy begins at home.

Chapter 1 – Introduction

One of the most fundamental human needs is for shelter

Social housing provides tenants with more affordable homes and greater security than private sector tenants experience, and in Scotland almost a quarter of all households live in social housing. However, resources are scarce and there are over 167,000 households on local authority waiting lists waiting for homes.[1]

For those employed by the housing sector, the work is often challenging. At the heart of this work is communication between housing workers and their customers, with interactions including complaint handling, arranging maintenance, and supporting inquiries. There is also focus on supporting tenants to become active in their local area and enabling and encouraging customers to become more involved in helping to shape housing services. The Scottish Social Housing Charter outlines the need to prioritise customers and ensure they play a key role in the design and delivery of services.[2]

Despite the introduction of many new engagement techniques, the sector is still facing several key challenges; most significantly that traditional tenant participation structures are failing to reach beyond certain groups of customers. While engagement structures are often based on intensive ways of getting involved for a long period of time – such as joining a tenants' group – new technologies and different experiences of engagement in other areas of life have changed the ways that customers people want to get involved.

It is timely to rethink participation approaches in the housing sector to ensure they are appealing to those who have limited time and energy to commit, and that they continue to allow for an open-ended dialogue. The ability of customers to shape decisions rather than just respond to a set agenda should be ensured, and new ways of engaging should be sought that draw in those who have historically felt disconnected.

A prerequisite here is that engagement must be genuine: when asked for input, people should experience a real opportunity to influence the outcomes of key decisions and policies. Subsequent follow-up should demonstrate how their comments have been heard and, where possible, acted upon. In a climate where costs and legalities may limit the scope for change, it may be challenging to create an environment where engagement has a genuine impact – but doing so will build trust between an organisation and customer, help develop deeper bonds and relationships between customers, and enable the development of efficient and effective services.

As Scotland's largest provider of social housing, Wheatley Group are interested in understanding how the housing sector can better involve customers in their work.

We, The Democratic Society were established to improve the participation people have in the decisions that affect their lives. The Democratic Society was commissioned to explore new ways of tackling the long-standing challenges that the housing sector is facing regarding engagement.

We conducted a research exercise to explore new avenues for engagement. We carried out desk-based research to identify existing practices from outside the housing sector and from around the world. We also spoke with staff across Wheatley Group and a variety of customers. This approach helped us create a number of initial ideas that were presented and discussed at a conference in November 2017 that brought together international experts on participation and engagement alongside housing sector staff and customers. This was followed by a synthesis session bringing together our researchers with experienced staff from Wheatley Group to identify key topics for further consideration, and workshops were conducted to explore these ideas further.

Wheatley Group and Demsoc are keen to share the key findings gained from this process. Our aim in creating this report is to describe novel approaches to public engagement that may inform new strategies for improving the communication between staff and customers and give customers more influence over the services that they use. We recognise that one piece of the puzzle is how housing providers engage with and listen to the experiences of front-line staff but, while an important topic, staff engagement is not the focus of this piece of work.

We hope the key findings within this report will be of interest to both the housing sector and its customers, helping to stimulate further conversations and re-energise thinking about the new ways these groups can work together. The options we present may overlap with, or supplement existing practices in the sector; while we advocate new ideas, we are cautious of implying that radical change is needed. Our aim in producing this document is to expand the choices that housing professionals have so that they may find useful tools to support more effective engagement that build on and augment their existing work.

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[1] Scottish Government, Housing Statistics for Scotland – Housing lists. Accessed online July 2018 at: gov.scot/ Topics/Statistics/Browse/Housing-Regeneration/HSfS/HousingLists

[2] Scottish Government, Scottish Social Housing Charter April 2017. Accessed online July 2018 at: gov.scot/ Publications/2017/03/8379

Chapter 2 – What is Good Engagement and Why Does it Matter?

The lived experience of residents provides rich expertise. Working collaboratively with residents can build both better services and more confident communities

At its most simple, engagement happens when there is a formal strategy to bring people together for collaboration. At a more meaningful level, engagement requires an organisation to give its customers a real opportunity for influence and participation.

For a housing association, good engagement goes beyond the interactions based around day-to-day service provision, such as collecting rents or documenting requests for repairs; it also goes beyond the traditional processes for responding to specific concerns when a customer raises an issue.

In developing good engagement, housing providers have the opportunity to create an environment which supports customers to project their voice, and to take action – either independently or with their peers – to improve their community and local area.

The Benefits of Good Engagaement

BETTER SERVICES
LEARNING FROM THE CUSTOMER'S EXPERIENCES

BETTER LOCAL AREAS
PEOPLE SHAPING WHERE THEY LIVE AND BUILDING STRONG COMMUNITIES

HELP PEOPLE HELP THEMSELVES
HELPING COMMUNITIES TO ACHIEVE MORE THEMSELVES

UNDERSTAND DIFFERENCES
RESIDENTS AND HOUSING SECTOR UNDERSTANDS EACH OTHER'S PERSPECTIVES

PEOPLE POWER
GIVE PEOPLE CONTROL AND LET THEM KNOW IT

BUILD CONFIDENCE
HELP PEOPLE REALISE WHAT A DIFFERENCE THEY CAN MAKE

In this way, housing providers can develop new working relationships with tenants to the benefit of both: organisations will receive insights that benefit their work and can help create better services, and customers will have greater opportunity to create residential areas and services that work for them. Crucially, good engagement changes the nature of the relationship between housing providers and residents, developing trust as housing providers

and residents see what can be achieved together, and enabling changes that may otherwise never have been realised. Additionally, by ensuring engagement activities work well for customers and take into account capacity building, it is possible to help residents develop confidence and skills that can empower them in other areas of life, and effect change elsewhere.

Principles for Good Engagement

To ensure that all participants have a positive experience, good engagement should be:

- **Understandable and transparent** – Every activity needs a clear and stated purpose. The process should be transparent and communicated in a way that ensures tenants and front-line staff have a shared understanding about what will happen before, during and after the activity.

- **Timely** – Engage with tenants and communities early so that people have a chance to influence a decision or idea while it is in the early stage of development. Ensure insights gathered are used quickly enough to be worthwhile.

- **Meaningful and empowering** – Ensure an organisation is prepared and able to use what is heard. Actively invite customer priorities and perspectives rather than taking sole ownership of the agenda. Ensure this is carried out sensitively, helping customers overcome barriers such as a lack of confidence, and capacity build where possible.

- **Varied** – Multiple channels and approaches should be used so that people are given the opportunity to participate in ways that work for them.

- **Fair and inclusive** – Consider the diverse needs of the whole community and cater to those with particular needs to ensure they have sufficient access and the opportunity to state their views. Ensure the activities do not privilege the views of one group or individual over another.

- **Beyond the pattern of 'us and them'** – Working collaboratively, openly and responsively with customers to build trust. Customers should also be encouraged to work together and understand each other's perspectives.

- **Responsive** – Communication shouldn't end when participants have spoken; update participants from the activity so that they are aware of the outcomes. Demonstrate how customer ideas are reflected in key decisions.

- **Supportive** – Where relevant, help customers to understand the wider context. While recognising that customers do not need to be experts in housing policy, where there is interest and relevance, think about how to share knowledge and expertise so that they are able to contribute informed opinions.

- **Safe** – As far as possible, anticipate risk and ensure safety for everyone involved.

Engagement need not be a two-way conversation between a staff member and a customer; instead, different strategies can encourage customer-to-customer interaction so that community cohesion can be improved as customers develop a greater understanding of the

different perspectives held by others. This helps to build more resilient communities and reduce social isolation.

To realise a shared vision for improved engagement, an environment needs to be built in which customers can easily get in touch to share their experiences and viewpoints, detailing how housing providers can work better to provide better services, housing, and support better communities.

Historically, interactions between housing sector staff and customers have focussed on solving issues and while this remains important, more meaningful engagement requires going a step further. A first step is to improve existing communication channel, but rethinking engagement can go yet further: a transition is needed in the relationship between customer and service providers in which housing providers do not just act on behalf of communities but work collaboratively with them to deliver change.

Vision For Engagement: Building Blocks

DO YOUR CUSTOMERS...

Know you value their opinions & want to work with them to have the best services & area?	Feel in control and able to achieve changes that fit everyone's priorities, not just yours?	Feel that it's easy to speak up and be heard.
Understand what you're working on and how they can get involved?	Feel that you are frank with them. Incl. being up-front about what others have told you and how you responded	Feel that the agenda is open rather than controlled?
Understand evidence? Can they engage with others' views when making decisions?	Know what will happen to points raised, in what timeframe, and how they can escalate their concerns.	See change happen? Know participation makes a difference?
Often get to talk with people near them about local issues and work together to make changes?	Feel that local organisations will work together to help get things changed.	

HOW TO FIT ENGAGEMENT INTO YOUR WORK

Engagement is a big part of your work. You use it to get info that is useful. This happens quickly.	You respond flexibly to what customers tell you and speak to them early enough to factor in their priorities.	You show what customers tell you, how you responded and how they've made things better.
You have frank conversations with customers. How they can contribute comes ahead of public image.	Local staff have enough permission to communicate and engage with customers freely	You work closely with other local bodies. Red tape doesn't block customer engagement.
You are realistic about costs/risks of engaging effectively, and factor this in to how you engage.	You realise that customers often lack confidence and use engagement to build this.	You talk in language that is relevant to customers and their priorities., not just to yours.

Chapter 3 – Fresh Approaches, Tools and Techniques

There is no single 'right' method; take into account the context and purpose.

There is no single tool that ensures good engagement. Instead, those looking to design activities must balance a cross-section of considerations to meet the needs of a given situation. This involves factoring in scale, context and audience before selecting an appropriate approach (see 'Getting the Right Balance' below), deciding for instance whether to work with individuals – which allows for deep discussion and exploration on single issues, or to work with a group – which helps build community relationships, surfaces a wider range of issues, and takes a larger number of people on the journey.

This section showcases examples of inspiring practice for working with people from a range of different contexts outside of the housing sector. For each topic, we explore key principles then introduce examples that can be adapted to meet the needs of the housing sector.

Getting the Right Balance: Dimensions of Engagement

Invited in	CUSTOMERS ARE...?	Proactively voicing opinions
Focused	STYLE OF CONVERSATION	Open-ended
Ongoing	BUILDING A RELATIONSHIP	One-off
Talking	GIVING AND GETTING INFORMATION	Listening
Working with a person	SCALE	Working with a group
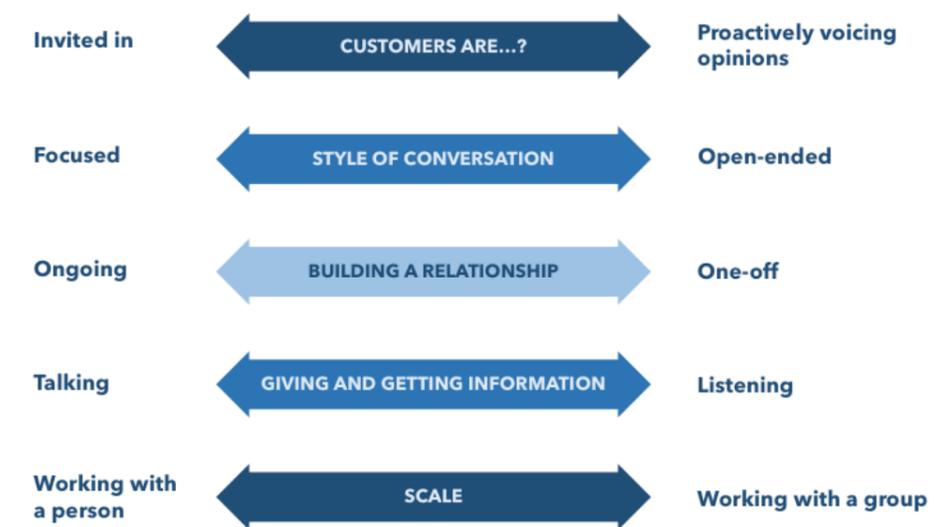
Whatever engagement activities are created there is a universal requirement: the organisation must be willing and able to act upon what is said. To achieve this, a clear commitment from senior staff is key to ensuring an organisation has a culture that enables customers and front-line staff to have confidence that what is shared by customers will be heard, listened to, and acted upon.

1. Working Together in New Ways

Housing providers have an important impact on shaping local areas and the people who live in or use these places. The lived experience of communities is invaluable to this and a co-creative approach can help embed local insights into housing providers' work.

a) Moving from consultation to co-creation

In beginning to involve customers early in decision-making, an organisation **moves from consulting customers to co-creation**; working with tenants from the start to develop plans in relation to customer experiences, priorities and ideas rather than asking for input on plans that are already shaped or close to finalisation. In doing this, service providers must be willing to listen, to allow open-ended conversations, and to handle potentially challenging conversations that deviate from any original agenda. Working together in this way also provides opportunity for any ideas to be iteratively designed, testing early prototypes and taking on board feedback.

There are many innovative ways of identifying customer priorities and experiences to inform the development of services. Journey mapping – a user research technique – captures the emotional impact of the journey by asking a customer to talk through or show how they use a service and how it made them feel. This can identify opportunities for improvement that might otherwise be missed. Interactions between customers can be built into a process like this, inviting tenants to share experiences with others to surface common themes and potential interventions.[6]

Case study: Customer Journey Mapping
Journey mapping is a user research technique that discovers how people use your services, and what this experience is like for them, by looking at their whole journey.

It is often done through one-on-one conversations between user researchers and service users, though other methods could be used.

Wheatley Group commissioned the user research agency Snook to study customers' experiences of their services. The journey maps they created from this can be seen online.[4] They also created a video to depict some of this information in a richly expressive way that helps spark question about how services might be improved.[5]

More simply, a walk could be organised through a neighbourhood to talk about upcoming plans, allowing a housing provider to simultaneously inform customers about planned developments, gain feedback on these, and identify further priorities.

b) Giving customers direct powers over budgets

Customers can be invited to choose how and where money is spent; providing a tangible opportunity to steer spending decisions can build trust between service providers and service users. It can also be a useful starting point from which to encourage the culture change needed that support new ways of working.

'Participatory Budgeting' (PB) is a means by which a community is given direct power to decide how a pot of money is spent. At its most involving, the community submits ideas and projects, discusses these suggestions and then decides together how the money is spent – either through voting or developing a consensus opinion.

Case study: Participatory Budgeting in Antwerp[7]
Participatory Budgeting is used in Antwerp to apportion 10% of the city's budget (1.1 million euros) and all residents can take part in the process. Unlike many other places they use a consensus building approach, rather than voting. The rationale for this is to encourage discussion between citizens about what is best for the community as a whole.

At events residents sit in groups of five to discuss what is working well and what might be improved in the city, before choosing five themes for action spread over eight policy domains. The 12 themes with the most votes from all groups go through to the second stage. Here residents sit in groups of seven, and using 12 poker chips, each representing 10,000 euros, decide how they want to apportion funding between these 12 themes. To help inform participants information is provided outlining how much actions under each theme might cost and what related action is already planned. A theme will only be given funding if gets at least six chips (the equivalent of 60,000 euros) and if at least four different people support it.

Residents and non-profit organisations can then submit ideas for projects within this budget. Finally, residents come together in small groups to choose which of these proposed projects should be funded. Each group selects its five most popular projects from each of the 12 themes. The project that is ranked highest across all groups is funded. This keeps happening until all the funding is allocated. Successful projects are announced five minutes after they are chosen, making clear that the participants are in charge.

PB has the potential to attract high levels of public involvement: the City of Paris conducts an annual PB programme, and in 2016, 160,000 residents took part (about 7% the population of Paris) with 93,000 of them casting a vote.[8] The scheme was established to balance various needs within the city with separate PB domains for district level and city-wide projects. This approach ensures that each district has access to funds, as well as access to funds specifically allocated for projects concerning youth and education.

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[4] "Housing is a place for you to call home", Snook. Accessed online June 2018 at: wearesnook.com/projects/wheatley-group/

[5] Reggie's story, Snook. Video accessed online June 2018 at: vimeo.com/191631588

[6] This resource summarises the approach used by the UK government in service development: gov.uk/service-manual/user-research

[7] More information about the Antwerp Participatory Budgeting programme can be found online nws.eurocities.eu/MediaShell/media/Antwerp_participatory_budget.pdf and antwerpen.be/nl/info/54b7b08ab0a8a75d348b45c1/burgerbegroting-district-antwerpen (In Flemish, but accessible in English using auto-translate)

[8] More information about the Parisian Participatory Budgeting programme can be found online: participatorybudgeting.org/pbparis/

c) Working in the open

Ensuring an organisation works in a more **open and transparent way** makes it easier for customers to understand what decisions are being made and by whom, and it helps them to feed into this decision-making. Sharing learning and thinking at an early stage, both through blogging and offline, will help build trusted relationships and help customers to remain informed about future plans.

Making it clear to customers where decisions are made will help customers know best who to engage with regarding issues they have, and where pertinent, restructuring key decision-making meetings to directly invite customers to share their experiences. Not everyone is able to attend meetings in person however, and live-streaming these and sharing them online can help reach a wider audience. Questions can even be taken from an online audience through use of social media, to help engage this wider audience.

Customers can also be invited to help shape the key areas that committees, especially those carrying out a scrutiny function, focus upon. Recently, the Culture, Welsh Language and Communications Committee of the National Assembly for Wales invited the public to help select the topics this committee carried out inquiries into. The Chair, Beth Jenkins AM, asked for ideas to be submitted through social media and targeted offline workshops, and then invited the public to vote upon a shortlist of the proposed ideas.[10] In a housing context, a similar approach could be adopted to help customers prioritise topics they think should be looked at more closely.

> **Case study: More Engaging and Collaborative Decision-Making in Oldham[9]**
>
> Oldham Council restructured its decision-making to bring decisions closer to residents and involve them more in the process.
>
> The council area was split up into a series of neighbourhoods and the councillors responsible for these hold meetings within these areas to set local priorities. These public meetings were structured to allow questions at the start of meetings. A power of recall was also set up so that 100 signatures can require this 'district executive' to look again at decisions.
>
> These changes were part of the council positioning itself as a 'cooperative council' that works with communities.

d) Helping housing providers and their customers work together in new ways: a summary of approaches.

New ways of working – possible approaches	
Make it clear, through diagrams if necessary, who is responsible for making different decisions, and how these decisions are made. Make it clear how and where customers can feed into this process.	Share plans early – both online and offline – and **invite customers to help shape work in a meaningful way** at a very early stage. Ensure customers are able to be part of shaping the priorities and work, and the work takes on board a customers lived experience.
Sharing **editable documents** allow customers to comment on, and propose edits, to texts of new policies. This could be as simple as sharing a draft word document with the community, sharing a Google doc, or using purpose built software such as Madison.[11]	**Make meetings easy for customers to attend**, either in person or through use of video streaming. There are a number of cheap options to do this, including using 'Facebook video'. **Design these meetings so that customers can get involved in a meaningful way**, bringing their perspectives and lived experiences.
Invite customers to share their priorities for improving a local area. This could be through crowd-sourcing ideas (see 'Creating New Routes for Conversation' below) and the housing association implementing them, or through use of Participatory Budgeting.	**Design competitions** can be one way of reaching out to a wider group, where there are physical changes needed to a local area, that residents themselves could come up with ideas for, and choose between these.
Implement community walks as a means of sharing plans and surfacing feedback. Walking through an area can stimulate ideas and helps encourage a sense of working together to build great places.	**Develop services and changes iteratively.** Share early stage prototypes and roll changes out in small areas first. Take on feedback from customers and ensure this feedback is acted upon before either developing prototypes further and rolling out changes further.

2. Developing new ways to be heard

It is important to make it easy for a customer to speak up, either proactively or in response to a designed engagement activity, and so it is crucial to ensure there are multiple channels through which customers and housing providers interact. These different channels may reflect the different types of outputs required; people are unlikely to phone a call centre just to share a suggestion about how a service may be improved.

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9 For more information, see oldham.gov.uk/info/200557/neighbourhoods and thersa.org/globalassets/pdfs/reports/oldhams-cooperative-council-report.pdf

10 For more information see assemblyblog.wales/2016/12/13/culture-welsh-language-and-communications-public-decides-on-future-committee-inquiry/#more-3304

11 See: mymadison.io/

Innovative approaches can offer much here, but traditional methods should not be overlooked. A range of channels, operating at different times, requiring different levels of engagement and taking place both online and offline, are likely to be needed if engagement is to be fully inclusive. This is especially true with respect to digital technology. There remains inequality regarding who has access to and confidence with digital tools, and so the use of digital tools in engagement should be done mindfully. The important point here is that empowering one group through digital approaches should not happen at the expense of another. There is scope for capacity building here however, in providing customers with transferrable skills and confidence through either providing training or enabling peer-to-peer support for developing digital skills.

a) Deliberation
Deliberation is an approach that encourages conversations between customers, helping them to understand each other's perspectives, and helping to develop empathy among a community. It can also enable a service provider to understand the viewpoints of customers.

There are a number of differing approaches that can be used to enable deliberation, Citizens Juries, Citizen Panels, World Café style events to name just a few. Some organisations focus on bringing together everyone who wants to participate, while others focus on bringing together a 'mini-public', a group whose makeup reflects the different demographic sectors of a wider community. In some approaches, a community is invited to discuss and deliberate on their own experiences, while in others – such as a Citizens Jury – a range of experts share evidence from a range of perspectives, and participants can use this information alongside their own expertise from lived experiences.

> **Case study: Citizen Panel in The West Midlands** [12]
> The West Midlands Combined Authority formed a Citizens Panel to agree key considerations for planning future mental health services. They recruited 21 mental health service users from 115 people who applied to take part.
>
> Participants were encouraged to reflect on what helps or hinders their mental health, and to think about their own experiences. Experts were then invited to give a short talk and answer questions to help participants reflect further on these building blocks.
>
> A five-week pause, punctuated with open sessions to hear from other stakeholders, allowed participants further time to reflect. When the group returned they drew up recommendations which were communicated in a public report to a commission looking at this topic.

Choosing whether to work with a smaller group actively selected to be representative of the community demographic, or a randomly selected group that brings together many voices depends on the exact purpose of the engagement activity. A larger group may surface a wider number of insights and help to take a community on a shared journey, while a smaller group can be more focussed and easier to facilitate. Smaller groups can still act to improve the legitimacy of decision-making and can also serve as a pool of engaged advocates able

to promote initiatives that develop from discussion. Furthermore, having a group that has been specifically designed to represent the community may encourage service providers to consciously listen to the needs of people from typically under-represented groups.

Deliberative techniques benefit work best with strong facilitation. The necessary skills can be developed in-house, or through bringing in external facilitators where conversations may be particularly contentious, or where independence is particularly valuable. Consideration should also be given to supporting community members to develop these skills, thereby ensuring the organisational perspective doesn't dominate the discussion.

Deliberation isn't just an offline activity. Platforms such as Loomio[13] or Dialogue[14] enable this activity online, which can allow customers to engage at the times that are most suitable for them. As with other online activities, developing strong moderation and facilitation guidelines is crucial to keep discussion on topic (See 'The Route to Better Engagement' below for advice on how to do this).

b) Creating new routes for conversation
Making it easy for customers to raise ideas and share thoughts requires the creation of 'lighter' channels of communication. Crowd-sourcing, which encourages customers to share suggestions for how a local area could be improved, is one such light touch channel that allows a diverse range of ideas to emerge.

An online approach to this is detailed below in 'Case study: Crowdsourcing in Estonia. A similar approach has been used by the City of Gijón Council in Northern Spain. 'Participa Gijón' is an online portal which provides an open-ended space for people to share their ideas for improving the local area, alongside also asking for public feedback on council plans, and providing information online about the council's work.

> **Case study: Crowdsourcing in Estonia**[15]
> In 2012, a platform called 'Your Priorities' was used by the President of Estonia to support a crowd-sourcing activity to improve politics in the country. [16]Five key themes were posted, and citizens were invited to propose constitutional reforms, to comment on the ideas of others, and express support for their favourites. During the period that the process was live, 60,000 people (4% of the population of Estonia) visited the site, making 2,000 proposals and adding 4,000 comments.
>
> After three weeks, the site was closed, and seminars were held for each theme, bringing together politicians, constitutional experts and online participants to select a shortlist of the most impactful ideas. A representative sample of 550 citizens were selected to attend a 'Citizen Assembly Day' to discuss this short list and chose which to present to Parliament. The group decided to submit 15 ideas to Parliament. Of these, three were adopted and a further four partially adopted.

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[12] The West Midlands Mental Health Commission Citizens Jury , Shared Future. Accessed online July 2018 at: wmca.org.uk/media/1422/wmca-mental-health-commission-citizens-jury-report.pdf

[13] See: loomio.org

[14] See: dialogue-app.com/

[15] More information: rahvakogu.ee/in-english/

[16] You can find out more about 'Your Priorities' on the Citizens Foundation website at: citizens.is/

While housing providers often ask local communities to identify local priorities in neighbourhood plans, this can be a slow-moving process, and the use of online channels can allow an organisation to respond in a visible fashion much more quickly. Similar ideas can be taken offline; for instance, a simple bulletin-board asking people to share ideas can be used. However, ideally crowd-sourcing allows for opportunity for peer-to-peer deliberation. This deliberation, inviting customers to comment upon other ideas and identify what ideas customers feel will work best and why, can help individuals understand the differing contexts others experience.

Digital technologies can also provide easy ways of reporting local issues to their housing organisation. Smart phone apps, such as 'Traffic Agent' and 'FixMyStreet' (detailed in 'Reporting Issues in Oslo') encourage citizens to easily photograph or note local needs, with mobile technologies automatically recording where this is located. One benefit of using this approach is that it allows the creation of an online map of the area showing the concerns other residents are raising and allows residents to see how responsive the housing organisation is to points being raised.

Offline, regular drop-ins or well-advertised pop up stands can act in a similar way, and are often popular as they ensure residents do not have to sit through a whole meeting or event. What is heard in these places can be added to online tools, creating a single reference point of all that has been heard, and acted upon.

Encouraging perceived 'decision-makers' to be highly visible and run public question and answer sessions can act as a new channel through which residents can raise their voice and can help break down barriers between what may be perceived to be a faceless institution and those who live within an area. The case study 'Online Question and Answer Sessions' details a way this can happen online, however it also works well offline. Recently, the Mayor of Greater Manchester committed to take questions from the public at events in each of the boroughs of Greater Manchester.[21]

> **Case study: Reporting issues in Oslo**[17]
> Oslo's 'Traffic Agent' app is targeted specifically at children, encouraging them to see themselves as a secret agent and to photograph and report any issues that made roads less safe. It brings an element of gamification and playfulness to engaging people in local government. Other tools providing this service more broadly include: BetterStreet[18], colab.re[19] and Fixmystreet.[20]

> **Case study: Online Question and Answer Sessions**[21]
> Frans Timmermans, Vice President of the EU makes himself available for public questioning in regular online slots. This involves a Facebook Live stream through which people can ask questions and see his response. Questions are also taken via a dedicated twitter hashtag. This straightforward method could provide an easy way for being more visible and helping people to raise their voice.

c) Capturing everyday conversations

Good engagement isn't always about creating new opportunities to speak with customers. It is also valuable to make better use of existing interactions.

The daily conversations between front-line staff and customers are themselves likely to contain rich information. These can be useful provided staff have processes to record the insights they hear and can ensure these are passed to the relevant people internally. Customers should be informed that these conversations can be a way of implementing change, and how their ideas will be used.

Social media provides a space in which informal interactions are already taking place, and platforms such as Twitter. Snapchat, and Facebook provide a natural environment for customers to share their views, communicate with their neighbours, and discuss local issues. Housing providers should consider how they wish to engage and how best to use the opportunities that emerge; ensuring housing organisations are present in these spaces should form part of a broader communication strategy.

Housing providers should consider whether they wish to just listen on these channels or whether they wish to engage in conversation directly. Mapping out activity on key platforms and searching for specific discussions using key words is one option, but while 'listening' in this way is permissible by both law and the platforms themselves, it may be perceived as intrusive by some in the community if residents are not expecting an organisation to be present on the channel or acting in this way.

If a housing organisation chooses to directly engage with residents on social media, a decision needs to be reached regarding whether to use a singly managed organisational channel or whether to encourage local staff to set up their own professional accounts to engage, through which they can respond directly to residents. In inviting engagement and asking questions, it is important not to encourage vulnerable people to share sensitive information in a forum that is effectively public. It is also important to be mindful of demographics, and it may be beneficial to actively seek those who are under-represented in other engagement activities. In particular, consider young people, those who are disabled, and those from minority ethnic backgrounds.

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[17] For more information, see oldham.gov.uk/info/200557/neighbourhoods and thersa.org/globalassets/pdfs/reports/oldhams-cooperative-council-report.pdf

[18] See: betterstreet.org/citizen

[19] See: colab.re/

[20] See: fixmystreet.com/

[21] For more information see manchestereveningnews.co.uk/news/greater-manchester-news/andy-burnham-manchester-question-time-13361185

d) New Technologies to Explore the Impacts of Proposals

Digital technologies have created new ways of allowing people to understand planned proposals in their localities. Use of Augmented Reality, which can be accessed through a smart phone app, can help show people how proposals will impact the built environment in a more meaningful way than simple computer simulations.

A participative way of engaging residents on their local area could be to work collaboratively to use drones to map an existing space and use this to develop 3D printed models of a physical space. When these models are printed, proposals for change could be talked about with the community.

Likewise, digital mapping software or printed maps of a community can be used as a tool to invite people to map 'their' community, encouraging them to highlight what they consider the physical boundaries to be, and what they consider to be important within it.

> **Case study: Simulations and Augmented Reality in Rio de Janeiro**
> 'Smart Favela' is an application launched by the French company Toolz working with the city of Rio de Janeiro.[22] They have created a computer based 3D model of the city, and proposed developments can be mapped on to this, and made available for residents to access through smartphones or computers. This allows residents to comment on proposals, vote for their favourite proposals, and suggest other services they would like to see.[23]

e) Helping housing providers find new ways for their customers to be heard: a summary of approaches

Finding new ways for customers to be heard – possible approaches	
Run offline events to surface customer priorities. Use innovative approaches to help structure the conversations here, for instance think about using a 'World Café' format[24] or encouraging participants to think about things that stand out as being positively different Perhaps try encouraging residents present to reach consensus to encourage the group to think about how they would trade off priorities.	Create **informal offline spaces** for discussion. Sometimes more relaxed interactions can be productive than carefully constructed spaces. In addition, bringing together in social settings can also help tackle isolation and improve community. At its simplest this could be a coffee morning or co-organising a fun day with the community.

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[22] See the Toolz webpage on Smart Favela. Accessed online July 2018: toolz.fr/uk/en_EN/projet_en.php?inc_smart_favela_en

[23] You can see information about Smart Favela's features at 'Smart Favela BID' [video] Accessed online July 2018 at: player.vimeo.com/video/273689398

[24] For more information about 'World Café' style events see: theworldcafe.com/key-concepts-resources/world-cafe-method/

Finding new ways for customers to be heard – possible approaches *(continued)*	
Set up mini-public panels when discussing key proposals. Bring in a range of expertise to help inform the discussion and use this to help reach decisions that have a clear endorsement from a cross-section of the community.	Crowd-source priorities for improvement inviting residents to share their ideas online and offline. Where possible, make it easy for customers to engage with each others ideas.
Encourage the community to map their area – to highlight local issues, priorities and suggestions for improvement. Asset Mapping is a technique that allows people to identify what is good locally that can be built upon, while Appreciative Inquiry similar allows people to identify what strengths they and their community have that could be better used.	Make it easy to share experience of services online, creating an easy way to gain feedback, and create a platform to support this. Think about how to incorporate formats like images and videos as well as text, to make it easy for residents who may not have strong writing skills to take part.
Develop local online forums to support communities discussing local priorities, sharing information and connecting with each other. Before doing this, map out what existing online spaces are used for this activity so as not to duplicate existing work.	Run a 'Hackathon'. While traditionally based around developing software, increasingly this approach is also focussing on social innovation. Identify a challenge and invite volunteers to work together for a few hours to start developing creative solutions.
Explore use of innovative technologies to help people engage with proposals such as using visualisations of proposed changes to a physical area, or using augmented reality to show changes within a space itself, making engagement more appealing for residents.	Encourage leaders to host question and answer sessions, and where possible try to stream this online, and invite questions from those who are online, recognising that not everyone may be able to make an in-person meeting.

3. Working within a wider landscape

Housing providers are ideally placed to empower communities. They can connect a variety of key local agencies, professionals and existing community groups and, in doing so, can bring local groups together to build new initiatives.

a) Working well with Tenants' Groups

Tenants' associations and other local committees have traditionally held an important role in housing sector engagement; these existing groups can give customers a space in which they can voice concerns. However, there are concerns that these groups are often not diverse enough to represent the wider community. Housing providers can help support these tenant groups revitalise their membership through actively inviting new members from different demographics, addressing concerns about the diversity of these groups.

Like housing providers themselves, tenants groups can adopt new approaches to meetings such as broadcasting their discussions online, or adopting new venues and times to encourage different attendees. As other routes for dialogue between communities and tenants emerge, encouraging these tenants' groups to participate in and support these is important. Housing sector staff can work with them to develop their role as key advocates through expanding the reach of their activities, and through encouraging them to reach out through their networks.

Active members of these groups may be interested in becoming volunteers, taking a role in supporting participation. Volunteering has always had a role in communities and can help housing providers hear from people they may otherwise struggle to reach.

Case study: Using Volunteers to Reach Further in Vienna[25]
The 'Contact Visits' initiative in Vienna aims to gather specific information on the needs of senior citizens and communicate these to the city administration.

Every senior citizen in the city is visited by a trained volunteer, and their needs and views are fed back to the local authority. The volunteers also share information about local opportunities such as social events or opportunities to have their voice heard. Working in this way, with volunteers working with migrant communities in languages other than German where necessary, allows the city to easily reach many more senior citizens than they might otherwise have easily done.

b) Enabling customers to achieve change across the system
Issues relating to housing and neighbourhoods are the responsibility of multiple local actors, including the council, landlords, and health and social care professionals. The complexity of this landscape can be a significant barrier to people speaking up.

Housing providers can help make this wider landscape work more effectively by working with other professionals in this space and acting as a convening point. By bringing other local actors into engagement activities (where appropriate), customers have a greater opportunity to influence the decisions that affect their lives. It also allows these other actors to hear directly where they may be able to provide support or implement. Similarly, 'joining up' the various agencies and teams can support customers in identifying the right people or places for their issues.

Housing organisations can also provide customers with advice and practical support to help them push for wider changes as part of empowering them to find an effective voice. This might be through either supporting residents to develop skills for advocacy, or through supporting customers to respond to government consultations or to lobby for issues that are of importance to them.

Case study: Supporting customers to achieve change across the system
Oldham Cooperative Council – as part of the council's 'cooperative' approach they helped residents to realise the benefits of bulk buying energy. Using their position to help residents achieve things together in ways that are outside their traditional role.

Community Organising – Citizens UK use paid community organisers to link up local community groups, unearth shared local priorities, and help them campaign together on these issues.[26] While there may be concerns about being too political, similar options can be relevant to housing providers.

c) Helping communities achieve change locally
Communities and residents may wish to see activities or interventions that a housing sector provider cannot, or chose not, to provide, but this does not mean that the idea should be lost. What housing providers can do is to facilitate communities and individuals who wish to develop a new venture in the local area.

Housing providers are often well positioned to support individuals or groups to create new local social activities. There are many benefits here most notably the creation of more vibrant local communities, a chance to reduce isolation as well as improving integration.

This support can take a number of forms: housing sector staff can provide advice to help people develop initial ideas, promotion to help early phase ideas get off the ground, and training and support to deliver activities.

Service providers should also ensure they listen to residents to understand how existing rules and regulations may inhibit community action and, wherever possible, address these. It may also be possible to make funds available for communities to pay for new activities.

In order for this type of support to work, communities must know that it is available to them; Summarising this offer as part of an organisations' commitment to its customers or listing it as a working priority may encourage people to step forward with ideas.

Case study: Asset-Based Community Development in Dundee[27]
Two 'Link Up' workers in a neighbourhood in Dundee helped initiate nine new community led activities including: an allotment group, camera club, dance group, cinema club, and Family Drop-ins. In one year 748 people participated in activities (447 of them newly) and 81 people volunteered (30 of them new).

This exemplifies how the efforts of two staff members can open up an array of choices for the broader community.

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[26] The community organising approach is explained using an example from the London Olympics in this short video. youtube.com/watch?v=ddBjb-xRPOk

[27] 'DCDP Case Study: Inspiring Scotland & Volunteer Dundee' (2016) Bain, G. Accessed online July 2018 at: rankfoundation.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/Inspiring-Scotland-and-Volunteer-Dundee-Case-Study.pdf

Chapter 4 – The Route to Excellent Engagement – supporting implementation

Implementing the suggestions in this report and building a relationship in which customers take a greater role will bring many benefits. While many housing sector teams already work to an impressive standard in engaging with customers; others may need to make changes in order to embed engagement through their way of working. Leadership from senior staff across the sector will be crucial in ensuring organisational cultures that enable the adoption of this new way of working are in place and fostered.

Below are a number of resources and materials that can help on the route to excellent engagement. A number of steps on this journey have been identified, including communicating effectively, the impact of sharing control over key issues, and managing conflict. Each of these are accompanied by resources drawn from different sectors, hopefully providing fresh perspectives on universal issues regarding engagement. While some language or context may appear to differ from that experienced by the housing sector, within each are novel approaches that will be of value.

The various challenges can be broadly grouped as follows: the importance of good communication, the impact of sharing control over key issues and the organisational culture change that is needed to effectively hear from and implement what is heard.

1. Communicating Effectively

a) Frontline interaction
Frontline interactions with clients are critical for building trust and engagement. As with any relationship, there is always a risk of miscommunication. This may be particularly true when emotive issues are discussed, and also for those customers who do not find it easy to raise their voice. Communication should be honest and open, enabling customers and staff to understand situations together so that they can identify a solution or further avenues of support.

Particular challenges include responding to people who are angry or anxious about their situation. In such cases, it is important to focus on clear and honest communication, especially when it's not possible to respond positively to a request or idea. It can also be useful to ensure that staff don't sound defensive when explaining the difficulties involved in addressing an issue.

Strategies

- Listening well is a powerful skill. Explore, as a team, how initial interactions with customers can encourage or discourage people from raising concerns. Run a listening exercise to learn from frontline staff what the key challenges are regarding clear and honest communication and tailor training to develop skills.
- Build a digital space to collate success stories: celebrate staff who manage difficult conversations, share positive feedback and create archives for institutional memory.
- Create organisational guidelines for managing common situations
- Regular meetings (for example, a monthly workshop) to bring staff together to reflect on challenging cases and customer feedback.

Strategies *(continued)*

- Ensure that staff feel supported in their work, for example: do staff know who in the organization they can approach if they have a difficult conversation and need support; a mentor who can provide and guidelines so that staff know what to do if a conversation becomes abusive.

Useful resources:
- 'Scripts for Difficult Conversations', from StrategiesForNurseManagers.com: strategiesfornursemanagers.com/download_content/236111/1.cfm#
- '11 Pitfalls to Avoid in Difficult Conversations', from The People Development Network: peopledevelopmentmagazine.com/2017/06/04/difficult-conversations-2/
- 'Communicating in Difficult Situations', from Skills You Need: skillsyouneed.com/ips/communication-difficult-situations.html
- 'Dealing with Unhappy Customers' from MindTools: mindtools.com/pages/article/unhappy-customers.htm
- 'Keys to Effective Communication' from the National Institute Fire Centre: nifc.gov/hrsp/tools/keys_to_effective_communication.pdf
- 'Handling Customers in a Difficult Public Service Environment', from Occupational Health and Safety: ohsonline.com/blogs/the-ohs-wire/2012/10/customer-service.aspx

b) Recognising specific barriers
Customers may have diverse and often overlapping needs that must be met before they are able to engage; these might include mental or physical disabilities, language barriers, a lack of access to an event location or, in the case of online activities, access to an appropriate device, as well as limitations in digital skills – all these need to be identified and factored in. Some customers may be experiencing frustrations related to their personal situation or have circumstances that they find difficult to explain to others.

Any of these scenarios can make it hard for a person to engage through channels provided, leading to exasperation and strained relationships.

Strategies

- Use multiple channels; ensure that if one mode of communication excludes some people, there are alternatives available.
- Consider developing a checklist of considerations that event organisers or those creating a digital space can check.
- Explore the needs and experiences of particular individuals and groups to maintain sensitivity e.g. using a Disabled Customers user group for feedback, and wherever possible find advocates to provide informal insights into the needs of a given group.
- Identify which groups are not present (women, minorities and young people are often under-represented) and explore why this is. Active and targeted recruitment can help to redress balances, as can ensuring engagement activities are carried out in spaces they frequently occupy.
- Actively seek feedback from individuals with multiple overlapping needs and understand the specific barriers.

Strategies *(continued)*

- Support staff carrying out activities to respond to customers concerns in a sensitive fashion. Keep in mind how much lies below the surface of what is obvious, and how much it may have taken for customers to speak up.

Useful resources:

- 'Making your service accessible, an introduction', from the Government Digital Service: gov.uk/service-manual/helping-people-to-use-your-service/making-your-service-accessible-an-introduction

- 'Accessible Events Checklist' from Glasgow University: gla.ac.uk/media/media_386384_en.pdf

- 'Ensuring your venues and events are open to all' from SHAPE: luminatescotland.org/sites/default/files/Access%20Guide.pdf

- 'Guidelines for Accessible Meetings and Events' from the Disabled People's Network Steering Group Community Network for Manchester: mdpag.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/guidelines-Sept2006-1.doc

- 'How People with Disabilities Use the Web' from W3C Web Accessibility Initiative': w3.org/WAI/people-use-web/

- 'Internet Accessibility: Internet Use by Persons with Disabilities' from the Internet Society: internetsociety.org/resources/doc/2012/internet-accessibility-internet-use-by-persons-with-disabilities-moving-forward/

- 'About Web Accessibility for Disabled People': by Web Accessibility: web-accessibility.org.uk/

- 'Disabled Access to Websites under UK law' by Out-Law.com: out-law.com/en/topics/tmt--sourcing/e-commerce/disabled-access-to-websites-under-uk-law/

c) Balancing the personal and the public

Individuals engaging in any activity may share information and data that could put them at risk – the impact of this, and the potential vulnerability of participants as a result of this sharing should be considered. Processes for handling confidential information, either through written or digital records, already exist; but there is a wider issue of ensuring that the emotional impact and potential consequences of sharing have been anticipated and can be managed.

Customers may bring personal issues such as a complaint or a specific concern about their housing situation into a discussion about the community; similarly, during a one-to-one conversation with a staff member may introduce an idea that is relevant to the wider neighbourhood. This creates a risk that either type of issue may be missed as a result of being expressed in the wrong context. Engagement strategies should therefore ensure that opportunities to input ideas are well-signposted and that suggestions are collated in (or referred onto) the appropriate space.

Strategies

- Ensure that informed consent of participants is gained, and that customers are aware of the potential implications of sharing personal information such as that regarding their health. Where they chose to share this, ensure support is provided.
- Do not encourage customers to share potentially sensitive information on social media and ensure there are private channels through which this can be shared.
- Train staff to cope with this challenge, ensuring that personal issues don't get lost while keeping broader discussions on track. Make it clear to customers that there are different channels through which they can share different information. for different types of input.
- Through clear communications, ensure customers are able to understand what it is useful for them to share. Where information is shared that is valuable for other internal teams to hear, with the consent of participants, pass this on.

Useful resources:

- 'Guidelines on Free, Prior and Informed, Consent' from the United Nations REDD programme: uncclearn.org/sites/default/files/inventory/un-redd05.pdf

- The privacy risks of sharing health information online' from Reputation Defender: reputationdefender.com/blog/privacy/privacy-risks-sharing-health-info-online

- 'Hey Teens: Chances Are You'll Regret Oversharing Information Online' from Webroot: webroot.com/gb/en/home/resources/tips/digital-family-life/hey-teens-chances-are-youll-regret-oversharing-information-online

d) Working in fast-moving online channels

Communication in online communication channels – such as Facebook, Twitter, or online deliberation spaces – can move quickly, flowing in a similar fashion to conversation offline. However, in the digital environment it can be difficult to anticipate when peaks and troughs of activity might take place, leading to resourcing challenges.

Conversations may also take place at times outside of traditional working hours – at times that suit participants. This can lead to challenges regarding moderation and the facilitation of these spaces.

When using an online platform, a key decision is whether moderation takes place before or after comments are posted. In order to support the flow of conversation, it is recommended that moderation takes place after posting. This however adds the challenge of ensuring the overall environment remains positive and productive for all involved. This consideration is important, as the cost of moderating a platform 24 hours a day is not one that organisations are often able to meet, and conversations can rapidly evolve over a weekend, so contentious posts may remain in situ for a relatively long-time frame.

Strategies
• When using online forums, support moderating staff to agree a standard approach including a shared understanding of what is an appropriate comment and what is not, how to handle the removal of illegal and problematic material, and the time frame in which staff will act. Make sure this information is also clear to users on the site.   • Moderating staff should be clear about whether the responses they post in response to customer comments need to be signed off by senior staff, or whether they have the freedom to post without review. If the former, ensure senior staff are available to sign off responses with a short turnaround time.   • Consider developing a standard set of responses to questions that are likely to emerge repeatedly on the site to speed up the speed of response.   • Ensure staff moderating are confident and skilled in using the platform and well supported to deal with what may be challenging conversations. Training can help with this, and all staff should have access to a safe space to share their experiences. Outsourcing this work can make sense at times, especially if the topic matter is particularly sensitive.

Useful resources:
• '10 Things to Consider When Facilitating Online Discussions' from Bang The Table: bangthetable.com/10-things-to-facilitating-online-discussions/

• 'Community Management' from the Government Digital Service: gdsengagement.blog.gov. uk/playbook/#community-management

• 'Moderation Guide' by the Society of Editors: societyofeditors.org/files/files/SOE-Moderation-Guide.pdf

2. Sharing Control

a) Bringing customers into shaping the agenda and communication

As customers exercise a real influence over decisions, the control the housing sector has over their agenda and outcomes will be diminished. This requires flexibility on how housing providers work and may create conflict between responding to customer views and adhering to best practice. It can also be challenging for frontline staff to handle conversations if issues emerge that they do not feel empowered to talk about.

In encouraging customers to talk more actively about their community, a housing provider also loses some control over the messages that are shared; having frank responsive conversations will require a reduced central control of communications, moving from what may be perceived as a remote and promotional tone to more local and honest engagement. Critically, people external to the organisation will be talking about their perceptions, experiences and beliefs about what that organisation does (and doesn't) do. This can be challenging for both the organisation and staff involved, especially as there is the risk of words being misinterpreted.

Strategies
• Ensure local staff and organisations have enough flexibility in how they communicate and are able to develop their own authentic voice within the overall communications strategy.   • Messaging can become three dimensional and less subject to distortion if it is presented through visual means as well as verbal: try infographics, illustrations and charts.   • Work with customers to shape messages coming out of an engagement activity so that, as far as possible, a shared understanding can be communicated.   • Provide training that supports staff to handle unexpected conversations and empower them to find the information internally and communicate this where possible (see 'Front line interactions').

Useful resources:
• 'Improving Front Line Services: A Framework for Supporting Front Line Staff' from Scottish Government: gov.scot/Publications/2005/05/13124510/45235

• 'How to Turn Your Entire Staff Into A Social Media Army' from Fast Company: fastcompany. com/3053233/how-to-turn-your-entire-staff-into-a-social-media-army

• '13 Great Tools for Creating Infographics' from Creative Bloq: creativebloq.com/infographic/tools-2131971

b) Managing conflict

Inevitably, some decisions involve putting the wants or needs of one group above others. In a transparent, open environment where peer-to-peer dialogue is encouraged, choices that may be unpopular to some clients will be highly visible. It is important to ensure that engagement activities are designed so that decisions do not always go in favour of the largest communities, or those with the loudest voices.

There may additionally be some tension that emerges as attempts to reach different groups entail a diminished role for established community gatekeepers.

Strategies

- Use creative design, deliberation, and active facilitation to encourage customers to develop empathy and to see different perspectives in engagement activities.
- Enable customers to see both sides of an argument: honestly demonstrating that many decisions are a trade-off between the benefits and costs of a strategy may help people recognise the challenges faced within the sector.
- Be upfront about trade-offs involved in decisions.

Useful resources:
- 'Conflict Resolution Trainers Manual' from the Conflict Resolution Network: crnhq.org/content. aspx?file=66138|46070e
- 'Current practices in solving multiple use issues of Natura 2000 sites: Conflict management strategies and participatory approaches' from Alterra: ec.europa.eu/environment/nature/ natura2000/management/docs/report%20LOT3_Task%201-European_review.pdf
- 'Challenging Conversations: Increasing Engagement across Political and Cultural Lines' from NHPR: nhpr.org/post/challenging-conversations-increasing-engagement-across-political-and-cultural-lines#stream/0

3. Embedding change

a) Managing costs
Good engagement can be costly, and it is likely that the greatest cost is that of staff time. Engagement takes time, time to set up the activities, execute them, and then to review and consider how to use the outputs. Online engagement can be particularly time consuming.

Another significant cost beyond running engagement activities will come from the need to respond to what is being heard. Depending on what proposals are suggested, the potential impact of change is significant: from new working policies to community projects, staff may find themselves delivering ideas that are new and, most likely, time consuming.

Strategies

- Value and recognise the need for engagement by defining time and budget for the process and supporting staff delivering the activities. Acknowledge the impact on staff – reduce other tasks to ensure they are not overburdened.

Strategies

- Decisions have to be made about how good engagement can be afforded, and where it makes sense to prioritise this.
- It is critical to know which engagement activities are effective so that funds can be prioritised; use rating tools and post-event surveys to generate data.

Useful resources:
- 'Introducing the Valuing Engagement Toolkit' from Involve: involve.org.uk/resources/ knowledge-base/how-do-i-make-case-public-participation/introducing-valuing-engagement
- 'Monitoring and Evaluation: Some Tools, Methods & Approaches': siteresources.worldbank.org/ EXTEVACAPDEV/Resources/4585672-1251481378590/MandE_tools_methods_approaches.pdf

b) Establishing the right organisational culture
Any change in culture has to be led from the top. The senior team must show engagement activities are a priority, and give sufficient flexibility, permission, and support for staff to carry these out. Leading by example is crucial too, and senior managers demonstrate the behaviours and strategies they wish to see staff emulate.

Innovative approaches to engagement work best in an environment where staff are encouraged to try new things, and supported through any failure that results, rather than subjected to oppressive scrutiny or reprisals. Creating an environment where mistakes are identified and reflected upon in a constructive, supportive way is an important aspect of culture change.

Strategies

- Focus on the positive aspects of a new process, rather than the negative aspects of previous practice. This includes recognising that creating new ways of working is not a criticism of previous practice, but simply a recognition of changing times and implementing improvements.
- Ensure clarity is provided regarding expectations for engagement activities.
- Foster a 'no blame' culture in which all staff – including those in leadership positions – are able to admit mistakes and acknowledge limitations. Provide support to staff when mistakes happen and use failure to develop learning for the future.

Useful resources:
- 'How to Create a Successful Organizational Culture: Build it – Literally: from Haworth: mindtools.com/pages/article/newSTR_90.htm
- Aligning Your Organisations Culture with Strategy from MindTools: eu.haworth.com/docs/ default-source/white-papers/how-to-create-a-successful-organizational-culture.pdf?sfvrsn=4
- 'Whats Right About Being Wrong' from the ASK Magazine: nasa.gov/pdf/489053main_ ASK_40_knowledge.pdf

Strategies

• It is critical to know which engagement activities are effective so that funds can be prioritised; use rating tools and post-event surveys to generate data.

Useful resources:

• 'Introducing the Valuing Engagement Toolkit' from Involve: involve.org.uk/resources/ knowledge-base/how-do-i-make-case-public-participation/introducing-valuing-engagement

• 'Monitoring and Evaluation: Some Tools, Methods & Approaches': siteresources.worldbank.org/ EXTEVACAPDEV/Resources/4585672-1251481378590/MandE_tools_methods_approaches.pdf

c) Training, developing and supporting staff

Change can be unsettling; supporting a team to develop a new working culture involves training and mentorship for staff. It is important to provide the correct balance of formal and informal training to ensure staff members with different needs have the time and opportunity to develop the skills and confidence that they need to deliver engagement work.

Strategies

• Create regular meeting opportunities to 'check in' and make space for informal reflection on the changes.
• Share skills internally: staff with a strong track record in engagement may be able to run in-house training sessions, or act as mentors to less experienced or less confident colleagues.
• Explore the idea of peer-support and practice groups to share learning, experiences, and seek guidance form others. Short, frequent learning taking place in an informal fashion can help cement learning gained from other sources.
• Bring in external expertise through either a deep-dive session from a visiting specialist or introducing a staff exchange from an organization with complementary skills.

Useful resources:

• Internal Training – What. You Should Be Doing But Probably Aren't from hano>er recruitment: hanrec.com/2014/11/13/internal-training-what-you-should-be-doing-but-probably-arent/

• 'Change and the role of L&D' from The Management Centre: managementcentre.co.uk/ downloads/Change_and_the_role_of_LandD.pdf

• 'Creating Change Champions in your Organization' from Simply Communicate: simply-communicate.com/creating-change-champions-organisation/

Chapter 5 – Conclusion

Housing providers are already doing good work to get customers involved in their work. But desires for finding different and deeper ways of engaging, and the importance of getting engagement right, means that there is more yet to do.

This report shares inspiration from around the world that can help housing providers and their customers think about how to go beyond the good practice we are already seeing – helping to create communities that are more deeply connected and helping customers and housing providers to work together to ensure services and the built environment are informed by the experiences and wishes of those who use them.

When it comes to working out how to involve customers, housing sector organisations will always have to think about the details of their own situation and the best way forwards for them. Wherever possible, decisions about how to work with customers, should be made with those customers these organisations house and represent – putting into practise from the start their commitent to hear their voice and act upon it, creating opportunities for discussion, and co-producing these new ways of working.

The report also shares resources about how to help take the route to excellent engagement – recognising that new ways of working can bring with it some challenges. However, the organisations that make up the housing sector can overcome these, by building upon the lessons learned from engagement in other sectors, and by working together to share learning and best practice.

While some changes to current ways of working are required, achieving these changes holds significant potential. They help put customers more in control of where they live, provide them with the confidence to speak up realise change, and help to create better homes and communities for those same customers.