

Strong foundations

Building better dialogue between tenants and landlords



LGiU
the local democracy think tank

MEARS

“We are really pleased to see the four broad practical lessons you refer to in this report as these are consistent with messages with give out about what make for effective and sustained tenant involvement and empowerment.

“For us its crucial that landlords invest in empowerment, not just engagement. Finding ways to involve tenants strategically and long term, but which also empower the tenants to challenge the organisation when required. Being champions of co-regulation, we believe in enabling housing practitioners and tenants to work together to improve their communities, which is what this report is clearly pointing to.

“We particularly like the references to community champions in the report as this is again close to our ethos that organisations should look to work with tenants to understand best the services and initiatives they provide. Our Stronger Together campaign is a prime example of where we have tried to highlight how landlords and tenants can work together on tackling welfare reform issues.

“Making the best use of data is also vital for effective tenant empowerment – it really is the key to unlocking the potential currency of tenant involvement. Gathering customer intelligence from a variety of sources is the bedrock to delivering services tenants need.”

*Jenny Topham, Head of Corporate Services,
Tenant Participation Advisory Service*

“The National Federation of ALMO’s welcomes this report as a very useful contribution to the debate on tenant engagement. Landlords and tenants are facing a number of serious challenges and the report provides sound practical advice on how to support tenants and build resilience amongst their communities”

*Eamon McGoldrick, Managing Director
of the National Federation of ALMOs*



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Forewords

TENANT Engagement has been at the heart of social landlords' operations for decades. It is now commonplace for Housing Association and ALMO Boards to have resident members. Tenants and Leaseholders are frequently involved in procurement decisions and social landlords consistently strive to go beyond statutory requirements to consult. This is because experience shows us that services will be better if residents are involved from the outset.

If I look at the history of Mears over 25 years, it is no coincidence that our best service innovation has come from our branches that are most closely engaged with local tenants. To build on this, Mears has now created a national change club of tenants, who audit our services and work directly with our senior management to prioritise areas of service improvement.

So why, then, the need to re-examine such an established area of practice? Central government policy changes are re-engineering tenant/landlord relationships. Social landlords are finding themselves the backstop for Whitehall decisions risking long established relationships and changing the terms of engagement.

These seismic shifts in policy are demanding new approaches as the way we speak and interact with residents can mean the success or failure of our projects. Coupled with increasing pressure on budgets it is vital that our engagement practices optimise positive outcomes.

Mears has developed practical solutions which are supporting registered social landlords (RSLs) with the spectrum of challenges that they are facing including; rent collection, housing management, tackling fuel poverty, reducing anti-social behaviour, ending loneliness and integrating social care and housing.

The common thread through all of these is the customer but we know that a one size fits all approach is not enough and engagement needs to be nuanced whether you want to see behaviour change to reduce carbon emissions or you are trying to end the negative impact of one family who are acting anti-socially.

Whatever particular challenges an RSL is facing, the contractor can play a vital role in the solution and this report highlights some best practice examples.

Alan Long
Executive Director
Mears Group

WE ALL benefit from living in strong, resilient communities. Increasingly, the complex challenges we face as a society cannot be solved by governments or by citizens acting alone, but require a collaborative engagement between different sectors, what we at LGiU call Connected Localism.

Tenants in social and council housing are more likely than the wider population to struggle with rent and the cost of living so having the support of a strong and resilient community is particularly vital for them.

We are currently seeing massive changes to welfare provision, which disproportionately affect people in social and council housing. These changes sit alongside other significant long-term trends such as an ageing population, a drive towards energy efficiency, and digital inclusion.

The impacts from these changes are already starting to be felt and will continue to magnify over the next few years. As this research shows, there is a risk that vulnerable people and those already hard to reach will be hit hardest unless we are able to find new ways to support them and to help them support themselves.

Purely transactional relationships between tenants and landlords will not suffice to do this. Change is needed on both sides, to build new patterns of mutual support and responsibility. 'Nudge' and other behavioural approaches are interesting but they do not help to build the strong relationships that will be required to build a truly collaborative approach. So landlords and tenants must look at how they adapt together. Relationships – not transactions – are the key.

Practical models for this are indicated by the examples within the report, including:

- working with tenants to build relationships
- using customer contact points and data effectively – which leads to joined-up support, saving money, and improves services and participation
- targeted communications and digital inclusion
- community champions.

We hope that this analysis and the practical recommendations that arise from it will help councils, social landlords and others to work with their tenants to ensure that they are able to cope with changes to the welfare system and the bigger long-term challenges we all face.

Jonathan Carr-West
Chief Executive
LGiU



Introduction

Relationships between social landlords and their tenants are currently undergoing a period of change, as both parties strive to adapt to the new welfare reform agenda. These changes mark some of the most significant developments in welfare since the foundation of the welfare state, and have a corresponding impact on the way social landlords engage with their tenants, who are disproportionately represented among recipients of welfare benefits.

However, welfare reform is by no means the only driver for better engagement. Long-term challenges such as climate change and an ageing population also demand the active participation of both citizen and state. Such complex problems cannot be solved by governments or individuals alone and will require flexible collaboration.

It is clear that investment in community resilience and an open and adaptive dialogue between tenants and landlords will be necessary to respond effectively to the growing gap between demand and resources. A purely transactional relationship will not engage those furthest away from participation, and a shift in behaviour will be needed on both sides of the conversation if we are to address these challenges in future.

While there is a great deal of important work on the subject of tenant participation in governance structures and on tenant consultation, this research focuses specifically on the methods landlords are using to promote resilience in their communities, on communications between landlord and tenant and on landlords' work with partners and stakeholders to extend the reach and impact of their contact with tenants.

To find out more about how social landlords were engaging with their tenants on the ground, we undertook a survey of registered social landlords, ALMOs and retained stock authorities. The results, outlined in Chapter 3 make the following findings:

- Spend on tenant engagement has increased in the last financial year. Less than three per cent of respondents had seen a reduction of spend on tenant engagement, and six out of ten had seen an increase.
- Three-quarters of respondents to our survey agreed that residents will need additional advice and support services in future.
- Organisations feel fairly well prepared to respond to policy change, but there is still a high level of uncertainty, particularly around Universal Credit. A quarter of respondents overall, and a third of councils, said they do not have the resources they need to give people the right support and advice.
- Only a quarter of respondents reported that they were currently making use of customer contact points between their tenants and third party providers. However, 55 per cent expressed an interest developing these relationships in future.

Follow-up interviews with social landlords highlighted several innovative examples of programmes designed to improve communication with tenants, from housing association Moat's approach to

tenant and landlord rights and responsibilities, to the London Borough of Lambeth's multi-agency response to welfare reform. Chapter Four outlines a series of case studies based on these conversations.

Drawing on the experiences of those involved in the case study examples and respondents to our survey, we have identified four broad practical lessons that social landlords should consider in shaping more proactive conversations with their tenants.

Recommendation 1: Invest in sustainable tenant-landlord relationships

Tenant engagement strategies must invest in community resilience, and focus on giving tenants the tools they need to support independent living where possible. The widening gap between demand for services and available resources makes it imperative that households and communities are empowered to support themselves wherever they can. This does not mean removing vital services, but ensuring that resources are targeted towards community resilience projects. Digital inclusion strategies, energy efficiency schemes, employment brokerage programmes, coordinated financial advice/support and referrals to community networks all have a role to play.

Recommendation 2: Maximise the value of customer contact points

Mapping the formal contact points between tenant and landlord is a crucial first step to delivering coordinated and clear communications to tenants. This includes all their relationships with third parties, such as contractors and the voluntary sector who regularly engage with tenants. In many cases, information and advice from partner organisations will be perceived differently to that provided by the landlord themselves. Making the best use of these contact points opens up opportunities for more targeted and effective communication.

Recommendation 3: Identify community champions

People are often more likely to engage openly with a member of their own community than with an official source of advice, particularly in the context of welfare and rent arrears. Identifying champions within the community who can provide good information and signpost sources of support is an important way of reaching those groups who are furthest from engagement.

Recommendation 4: Target communications using data segmentation

Data segmentation techniques can help to identify those in need of specific forms of support, but can also pinpoint the best means of communicating with different groups of tenants, allowing better and more targeted use of resources and avoiding inefficient communication strategies.



1 Welfare reform and its impact on the tenant-landlord relationship

The government's welfare reform agenda is one of the most significant drivers for change in the history of tenant engagement. The new demands placed upon benefit claimants under the new system of welfare are having, and will continue to have, profound implications for both landlords and tenants alike. They will necessitate more proactive, enabling interventions on the part of social landlords.

However, welfare reform is not the only factor militating in favour of new forms of engagement. Long-term demographic, social and environmental trends all mean that public resources are spread increasingly thinly at a time of growing demand.

These challenges cannot be met by institutions alone and will require better citizen engagement. It is crucial that housing organisations recognise and respond to this change by taking a proactive stance on developing relationships that invest in community resilience.

The impact of welfare reform on tenants and landlords

The introduction of the Welfare Reform Act in 2012 heralded a wide range of changes to the way welfare is managed, including cuts to benefits and the reshaping of the existing structure of payments. The Act formed a central part of the coalition government's pledge to reduce the annual welfare bill and incentivise work.

Work and Pensions Secretary Iain Duncan Smith explained the ethos behind the reforms in a controversial interview in April 2013:

"What I'm trying to do... is to change the process so that we end up restructuring the culture so that people find that work always pays. It doesn't right now."¹

Irrespective of the debate surrounding the welfare programme, the current reforms to the welfare system are undeniably significant and far-reaching, particularly for social landlords who will see the impact of the programme on the ground and hold an important role in easing the transition for tenants. The ongoing implementation of the reforms consequently has major implications for the way that social landlords engage with their tenants. While the reform agenda constitutes a broad programme of work with an impact on most areas of welfare, some of the most important changes from a social landlord's perspective are as follows:

The **Under Occupation Charge**, which was introduced in April 2013, reduced benefits by 14 per cent for tenants with one spare bedroom. This has already created demand for increased engagement on the part of landlords, both in terms of explaining the impact of the changes to tenants, and offering options for responding. This includes assistance for tenants who want to downsize, financial advice and matching people to lodger schemes.

A cap on the total benefits of £500 a week for couples and single parent households and £350 a week for single adult households was introduced in April 2013, and rolled out

¹ Iain Duncan Smith, BBC Radio 4's Today Programme, 1 April 2013

in the 40 final council areas in August 2013. The cap was completed nationally in September and applies to a household's combined income from all the main out-of-work benefits and other benefits such as Housing Benefit, Child Benefit and Child Tax Credit and Carer's Allowance. The Department for Work and Pensions estimates that around 56,000 households will have their benefits reduced by the policy in 2013/14 and 58,000 in 2014/15.² The new cap has had a significant impact on many households in social housing and social landlords and councils have been responding proactively by engaging with affected tenants to explain the changes and support them to maximise their income.

Universal Credit (UC) is scheduled to replace the majority of means tested working age benefits and is due to be phased in between October 2013 and October 2017. In arguably one of the greatest changes to the welfare system, recipients of UC will have their benefits paid directly into their bank accounts, currently including Housing Benefit. In most cases this will transfer responsibility for managing housing costs, along with monthly spending to the tenant. In addition to other cuts to benefit and the requirement to manage these transactions online, there is a genuine danger of increased arrears, with negative consequences for both the tenant and the landlord, whose cashflow relies on regular payment of rents.

While these changes will affect all benefit claimants, social housing tenants are likely to be over-represented in those affected. According to the most recent English Housing Survey, almost two-thirds (64 per cent) of households in the social rented

sector were in receipt of Housing Benefit, compared with around a quarter (26 per cent) of those in the private rented sector. 56.63 per cent of social housing tenants were defined as 'economically inactive' compared with 23.79 per cent of private rented tenants, and 35.1 per cent of owner-occupiers.

The social rented sector also had a much higher proportion of older tenants: 29 per cent of social renters were aged 65 or over compared with only 8 per cent of private renters.³ While most of the changes to welfare are designed to affect working age claimants, there will be a related impact on older people in certain circumstances, particularly in cases where they live with a younger partner or relative.

A new tenant-landlord relationship

While it is too early to assess the full impact of welfare reform, initial indicators already suggest it will profoundly affect the relationship between tenant and landlord.

- A recent study carried out by the Centre for Economic and Social Inclusion and commissioned by the Local Government Association calculated that households claiming benefit will be £1,615 a year worse off in 2015/16 as a result of the coalition government's welfare reforms. It identified that four out of five of households hit are likely to need some form of assistance from their council to help cope with the reduction in their welfare, due to the shortage of jobs and affordable homes.⁴

² Department for Work and Pensions (16th July 2012), *Benefit Cap (Housing Benefit) Regulations 2012: Impact assessment for the benefit cap*

³ Department for Communities and Local Government (July 2013), *English Housing Survey: Households 2011-12*

⁴ LGA and Centre for Economic and Social Inclusion (August 2013), *The Local Impacts of Welfare Reform: an assessment of cumulative impacts and mitigations*

- Many local authorities have already seen a growth in demand for discretionary housing payments. Recent figures obtained under the Freedom of Information Act by Plaid Cymru showed that more than half of Welsh councils received more requests for additional housing payments in the first two months of the Under Occupation Charge than for the same period last year.⁵
- In March 2013, it was reported that tenants in South Wales taking part in a trial of Universal Credit saw total rent arrears rise seven-fold from £20,000 to £140,000 in seven months.⁶
- A central feature of Universal Credit is that it will be administered online. Figures from research firm Ipsos Mori show that in November 2012 only 68 per cent of local authority tenants and 64 per cent of housing association tenants had internet access. This is up from 60 per cent and 54 per cent respectively two years earlier, but significantly lower than mortgage holders, on 94 per cent, and private renters, on 88 per cent.⁷ The need to promote digital inclusion is set to become an important issue for both tenants and landlords.
- Increasingly, social landlords will fulfil both an outreach and enforcement role. On the one hand they will be supporting tenants to remain in their own homes, while on the other they will have an

enhanced role in responding to instances of rent arrears. The shooting of a housing officer and bailiff during an eviction in Brixton in July 2013 highlighted some of the tensions and risks involved in balancing these two roles.⁸

It will be impossible to evaluate the full long-term changes effected by the welfare reform programme for some time, but it is inarguably a major driver for change in the housing sector, with profound impact upon both social landlords and tenants.

While the emphasis on empowering residents has been central to the tenant participation ethos for some years, welfare reform gives it a new urgency; for the sake of community cohesion, for the wellbeing of their tenants and ultimately to minimise the risk of rent arrears. Clearly social landlords will need to develop a proactive response to some of these challenges, including upfront investment in some of the following areas:

- innovative ways of communicating the messages of welfare reform
- promoting digital inclusion among tenants
- offering advice and support for financial planning
- supporting employment outcomes for tenants
- coordinating downsizing options for those affected by the Under Occupation Charge.

⁵ Plaid Cymru press release (12 August 2013), <http://www.partyofwales.org/news/2013/08/12/tenants-appeal-to-local-authority-for-help-with-their-rent-in-wake-of-bedroom-tax-plaid-reveal/>

⁶ BBC Radio Wales, Eye on Wales (Sunday 10 March), cited at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-wales-21725686>

⁷ Cited in *Inside Housing* (3 May 2013)

<http://www.insidehousing.co.uk/tenancies/digital-divide-cuts-off-social-tenants/6526788.article>

⁸ *Inside Housing* (3 July 2013)

<http://www.insidehousing.co.uk/tenancies/housing-officer-shot-during-eviction/6527616.article>

Welfare reform presents a powerful driver for more proactive engagement on the part of social landlords. It calls for far greater financial independence from benefit claimants and puts pressure on their household budgets with a view to incentivising employment. Social landlords will need to continue to think innovatively about the advice and assistance they provide and how they engage with tenants on this issue to promote greater resilience among individuals and communities.

Long-term drivers for change

Welfare reform is an important driver for new relationships between landlords and tenants. Nevertheless, the changes to welfare are by no means the only factors influencing this change. Long-term socio-economic trends also demand more proactive engagement between landlord and tenant. Two examples illustrate this shifting relationship.

An ageing population. The percentage of persons aged 65 and over increased from 15 per cent in 1985 to 17 per cent in 2010, an increase of 1.7 million people. By 2035 it is projected that those aged 65 and over will account for 23 per cent of the total population. Those aged 85 and over will be almost 2.5 times larger than in 2010, reaching 3.5 million and accounting for 5 per cent of the total UK population.⁹ The rising demands of an ageing population place pressure on social landlords to consider how the needs of older people in their communities are met. Partly this involves

working in partnership with organisations such as care providers. However, the growing gap between demand and resources cannot be addressed by organisations alone. In future, citizens and communities will need to play a more active role in responding to the challenge. Local volunteering and time-banking schemes have a role to play in this agenda.

Climate change. Scientific consensus around the potential impact of climate change produced by humans is slowly being matched by a growing public awareness of the problem. While government has a role to play in negotiating international settlements, setting emissions standards and perhaps even using fiscal instruments to change behaviours, this is matched by personal responsibility for the way we live. Any effective response to the problem must draw on both government action and that of individuals. This is a particularly pertinent issue for social landlords, who have a responsibility not only to ensure their properties meet carbon efficiency standards, but that their residents have good energy saving advice and are empowered to make decisions that will help them reduce household costs.

These drivers represent complex, long-term and permanent challenges that cannot be resolved by individuals, governments or housing organisations alone. They will require new forms of active engagement between individual citizens, communities and institutions to coproduce effective responses.

⁹ Office for National Statistics (2nd March 2012), *Population Ageing in the United Kingdom, its Constituent Countries and the European Union*



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2 Implications for tenants and landlords: changing behaviour or changing relationships?

As we have seen, there is unprecedented pressure on housing organisations to be innovative and proactive in their approach to tenant engagement. But what does this mean in practice? In recent years there has been a surge in the popularity of the principles of ‘nudge’ or ‘behaviour change’ policy that seek to influence individual behaviour. However, we will argue that this is still often treated as a transactional, one-way-street of communication.

Behaviour change must apply to organisations as much as individuals if we are to form the types of relationship that are needed to address the challenges outlined in the previous chapters. What is required is a shift in the relationships between landlords and tenants, allowing both parties to adapt together.

‘Nudging’ tenants

Behavioural science has become increasingly influential in recent years and is popular among policy makers for devising engagement strategies. The Behavioural Insights Team (BIT) in the Cabinet Office, commonly referred to as the Nudge Unit, was created to devise ways for policy to be cheaper and more effective.

It suggests that there are relatively simple and cost effective ways of altering people’s behaviour, without resorting to directly coercive or heavy-handed regulation.

In their 2008 book *Nudge: improving decisions about health, wealth, and*

happiness, Richard Thaler and Cass Sunstein argue that there is a human tendency to follow shortcuts, conform to biases, and choose according to pre-established patterns. By modifying the context in which people make their decisions (what Thaler and Sunstein call the “choice architecture”) they can be nudged towards making choices which will lead to better outcomes.

The Institute for Government, working on behalf of the Cabinet Office, has argued that policy-makers should take note of alternative techniques of incentives, information provision, and communication in order to persuade people to make ‘better’ decisions for themselves.¹⁰ Tactics that change tenants’ behaviour in this way might make for a smoother transition, particularly at a time when tenants are expected to drastically alter their behaviour in order to manage direct benefit payments. The tactics include:

- **Making it easy and straightforward for people to act in the desired way.** This could involve adding known information to forms so there is less for the recipient to fill in, or requiring people to opt out, rather than opt in for certain schemes.
- **Highlighting the key messages,** by placing them at the beginning of a letter, or in a text box, as well as making clear the actions that are expected from the recipient.
- **Using personal language,** by addressing the recipient directly and

¹⁰ The Institute for Government and the Cabinet Office (2nd March 2010), *Mindspace: Influencing behaviour through public policy*

using technology to adapt messages according to individual circumstances, for example.

- **Prompting honest responses and ‘correct’ behaviour** by, for example, sending text messages as deadline reminders, and outlining the consequence of non-compliance.
- **Telling people what others are doing to encourage imitation.** This could involve telling employees about colleagues who donate to charity, or tenants about their neighbours’ activity in the local area.
- **Rewarding the desired behaviour, rather than sanctioning bad behaviour,** by offering certain privileges or prizes, for example.

which provide rewards for consistent patterns of behaviour to encourage people to be proactive and take responsibility for their own commitments, financial or otherwise.

- Providing a subsidised tidying and removal service in advance of insulation-fitting teams to encourage more people to have energy-saving loft conversions in their homes.
- Sending personalised text messages to encourage payment of outstanding court fines. These contained the recipient’s name, details of the fine, and the consequences if it was not paid. The BIT claims this has saved UK Courts £30m that would otherwise have been spent recovering the money.¹²
- More recently they have looked at ways to reduce money lost through fraud, error, and debt, by making sure that paperwork is always completed accurately.¹³ They have also looked at methods to increase charitable giving within private companies.¹⁴

Does it work?

The BIT has carried out a number of practical applications of the nudge theory.

- An investigation into the behavioural effects of the social and physical environments in social housing. By recruiting a number of staff liaison officers the team found that they could engender a different attitude among tenants, leading to more harmonious social relationships at multiple levels, as well as a reduction in anti-social behaviour and crime.¹¹
- Introducing savings accounts for tenants, which restrict the savers immediate access to their money, or

Challenges to the nudge theory

Behavioural theory is not without its critics and has been described by some as paternalistic, authoritarian and patronising. In *Nudge*, Thaler and Sunstein make the counter-argument that no choices are offered on a neutral basis and there is always some kind of design in how they are presented. In their model of ‘liberal paternalism’, choice remains open, but the

11 Freebridge Housing and Cabinet Office Behavioural Insights Team (19 June 2013) *Promoting Positive Outcomes: How the Physical and Social Environment can Affect Behaviour in Hillington Square*

12 Cabinet Office (2012) *Behavioural Insights Team Annual Update 2011-12*

13 Cabinet Office Behavioural Insights Team (2012) *Applying Behavioural Insights to Reduce Fraud, Error and Debt*

14 Cabinet Office Behavioural Insights Team & Charities Aid Foundation (2012) *Applying Behavioural Insights to Charitable Giving*

default option is defined by those designing the 'choice architecture'. As long as a principle of transparency is pursued, this form of criticism is invalid.

Nevertheless, any experiment in behaviour change should recognise the risks. Nudge provides an answer to the question of how we support 'better' choices on the part of individuals. However, the debate over its effectiveness tends to occlude the reality that what constitutes a 'good choice' is often equally contested. How do we define 'good' behaviour and is this definition universally accepted among very different groups of people? In this way behaviour change methodologies provide a technocratic solution to what is often a political problem.¹⁵

In practical terms there are other factors that should be considered. Opening up a perceived distinction between 'good' and 'bad' choices on the part of tenants could be counterproductive for community cohesion for example. Equally, an emphasis on nudge tends to shift attention towards individual choices and away from structural social inequalities, which constrain choices. By focussing their attention on 'defective' behaviour, policy makers could lose sight of the profound effect that social and economic structures have on peoples' lives.

From behaviour change to relationship change

Despite this, as we have seen earlier both the welfare reform agenda and broader socio-economic drivers are all demanding a shift in behaviour among citizens, with a profound impact on social tenants. Individuals are being asked to manage their own finances more actively, to engage online and to adapt their lifestyles to new financial realities. One interviewee in this study described welfare reform as "a huge experiment in behaviour change".

With the scale of the approaching changes in mind, housing providers will need to develop robust strategies if they are to respond effectively. They will require a range of tools, and behavioural change techniques could be one of these. Partly this will be about minimising the impact of changes on tenants and ensuring they are able to remain in their homes, but it will also be about adapting to new circumstances in which landlords will fulfil both outreach and enforcement roles. The tactics of the nudge approach provide a means of making straightforward changes, which pre-empt the need for more significant shifts.

We would argue, however, that behaviour change should not be a one-way-street. Councils and housing organisations cannot simply design better transactional choice architecture to address these challenges. Behaviour change must relate to both tenants and landlords, and the importance of more active participation cannot be underestimated. Participative forms of engagement are more likely to lead to strong and productive relationships with the necessary flexibility to adapt. This is likely to involve smarter working on the part of social landlords, the willingness to change themselves and upfront investment in work that will help them to communicate and engage with tenants in a more active manner.

Housing organisations will have to collaborate with tenants and coproduce solutions to the challenges ahead if they are to adapt successfully. A narrow focus on changing tenants' individual behaviour could miss the opportunity for redrawing the relationship on more participative lines.

But how are social landlords already adapting to this new environment? The following section outlines the findings from a survey of retained stock councils, registered social landlords and ALMOs to investigate current practice and expectations for the future.

¹⁵ *New Scientist* (9 November 2011) "'Nudge' Policies are Another Name for Coercion", issue 2837



3 The sector position

Our survey reflected some of the dominant attitudes towards current methods of tenant engagement, their expectations for the future, and their core concerns. There is a broad consensus that social landlords will have to adapt, with a corresponding investment of resources in this area of work; however, there is less agreement over what this should look like and a lack of confidence that the necessary resources are available.

The survey received 200 responses. Just over half (51.5 per cent) of these were housing associations, a quarter (24.7 per cent) retained stock authorities, and the rest were ALMOs, Large Scale Voluntary Transfer organisations, alms houses, and local authorities with arms length management bodies. The survey targeted officers in senior positions in relation to customer engagement and elected members with responsibility for this agenda.

Key findings

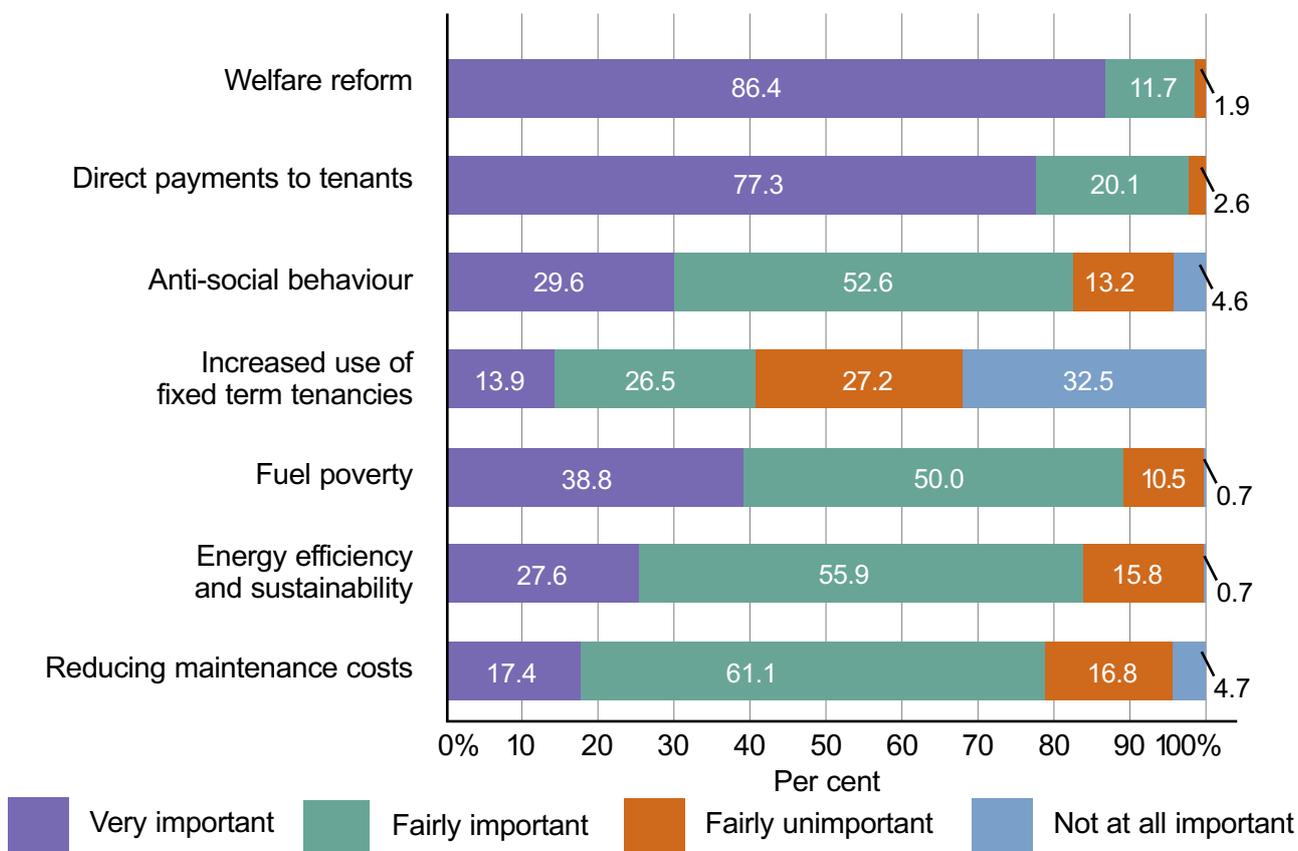
- Spend on tenant engagement has increased in the last financial year, reflecting demand in this area. Only three per cent of respondents had seen a reduction of spend on tenant engagement, and almost six out of ten had seen an increase.
- Face-to-face contact through visits to residents in their own homes is still seen as the most effective method of communication, with over 80 per cent rating it as 'very effective'. However, it is also recognised to be the most resource intensive means of engagement.

- Nearly 55 per cent of respondents said that social media is 'fairly' or 'very' ineffective and just under 45 per cent said that online information is an ineffective tool for reaching audiences.
- Organisations feel fairly well prepared to respond to policy changes in future, but there is still a high level of uncertainty, particularly around Universal Credit. Over a quarter of respondents overall, and a third of councils, said they do not have the resources they need to give people the right support and advice. Issues with data were highlighted, particularly by registered social landlords.
- Only a quarter of respondents reported that they were currently making use of customer contact points between their tenants and third party providers. However, there is significant interest for more work in this area in future. 54.5 per cent expressed an interest in this overall, and six out of 10 councils felt that this could benefit them going forward.

Increased investment in tenant engagement

Nearly 60 per cent of councils and 61.4 per cent of housing associations said that their budgets for tenant engagement had increased in 2013/14 compared with the previous year, while only 3.2 per cent overall said they had reduced. This perhaps reflects growing demand for

In your view, how important are the following drivers for an increased focus on tenant engagement in your organisation?



better tenant engagement as described in previous chapters.

Various drivers were identified for investment in engagement. The three most immediate of these were welfare reform, direct payments to tenants, and fuel poverty. However, other factors included digital inclusion, planning for investment, new build, co-regulation as part of the new HRA arrangements, a shift away from the Supporting People programme to targeted support for older people, general support for employability and improvements to customer service.

“Tenant engagement is the right thing to do and as a social landlord we want to work with tenants on maintaining and sustaining social housing for the future.”

“It is something that we have consistently believed in for many years and is an essential component of our customer experience agenda.”

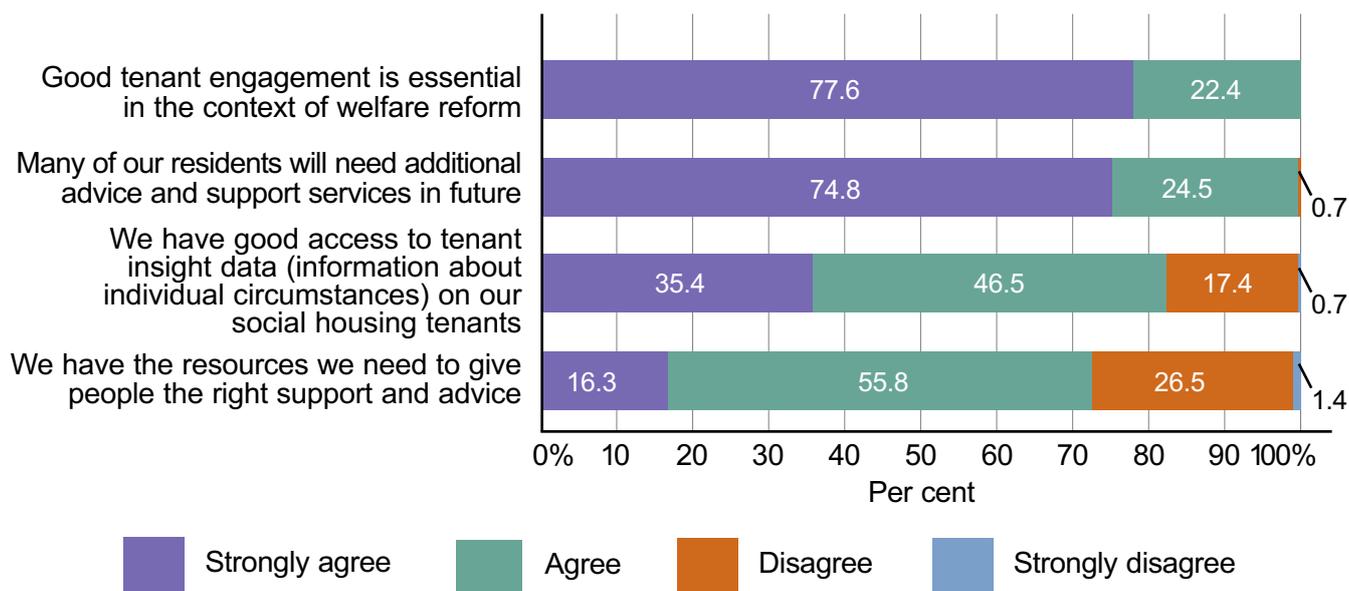
“The biggest driver for tenant engagement in this Borough is the drive to educate tenants to make them ready for work, along with other economic initiatives (encouraging business development, encouraging the voluntary sector, bringing the voluntary sector and business closer together).”

Communicating with tenants

When asked about their preferred method of communicating with residents home visits were the most popular. 81.6 per cent said they are ‘very effective’. 54.4 per cent of respondents said that social media is ‘fairly’ or ‘very’ ineffective and 43.5 per cent said that online information is an ineffective tool for reaching audiences. One commented:

“We have established that only 66 per cent of our residents have access to the internet and therefore our online and email contacts have been limited.”

To what extent would you agree or disagree with the following statements?



Other comments indicated that social media was expected to play a more significant role in the future.

Preparation for the future

Respondents generally indicated that they felt prepared for the changes that were introduced in April 2013, while just under 20 per cent said they were 'fairly unprepared' for Universal Credit. This was more pronounced among councils than housing associations.

One respondent commented: *"Whilst we are very prepared, it is difficult to predict how behaviours will play out."*

Another noted: *"Although we are prepared, we see this as mitigating the impact which we still think will be significant."*

Although more than three quarters of respondents agreed that *"Good tenant engagement is essential in the context of welfare reform"*, some barriers to ensuring this engagement were identified.

Barriers to tenant engagement

Comments identified **poor use of data** as a problem for locating and targeting at risk

groups, particularly by housing associations. Specific comments included the following:

"Data gaps and lack of engagement by the more difficult to reach groups impacts in this area."

"Data sharing and accuracy from local authorities is very poor."

Limited access to local authority data was highlighted as an issue several times, especially by some of the larger housing associations that operate across council boundaries. However, data was seen as a challenge for a significant minority of all types of organisation. 18.1 per cent of respondents overall said that they did not have good access to tenant insight data.

Increasingly stretched resources were also seen as an important barrier to better tenant engagement. Three quarters of respondents agreed that residents will need additional advice and support services in future, but a significant minority of 27.9 per cent of overall respondents felt that they did not have the necessary resources to give people the right support. Local authorities saw this as a greater problem, with a third saying they did not have the necessary resources.

Use of customer contact points

More than 60 per cent of respondents said that their third party providers were not involved in offering information and support to tenants, while only a quarter reported that they were. Housing associations were more likely to report involvement from their providers than councils however.

For those who did involve providers in the provision of advice and support, there were a number of methods of engagement. Many of the respondents noted that third party contractors/providers had been trained to give information on welfare reform and associated matters.

“Training to support service users to those in the area who have contact with vulnerable families.”

“All have been trained in the welfare reforms and all carry leaflets in their vehicles. All are aware of who/where to signpost someone if they cannot assist directly.”

“All contractors briefed on welfare reform and given information on the changes – both for their own use and to share with tenants.”

“Many of our partners are also involved in providing advice and assistance to tenants and signposting tenants to our services where appropriate.”

Other forms of support that were mentioned included signposting, alerting housing officers to potential problems and offering financial support for open days.

Although the majority of respondents did not currently engage with third party contractors in this way, there was considerable interest in developing work in this area in future. 54.6 per cent overall said that providers could play a greater role in tenant engagement. Half of housing associations and six out of 10 councils gave positive responses to this question.

There was some scepticism about the closer involvement of third party contractors; one respondent noted that “the wrong advice being given by a well-meaning amateur could cause significant harm”.

However, others were more enthusiastic:

“I think this will be vital. As more services are outsourced and local authorities move more towards managing resource contracts...there will be a loss of direct contact between residents and internal staff. Third party providers will have to pick up some of the slack here...”

“As they have the most contact with our residents, we believe all members of staff have a key role to play in raising awareness.”

Nigel Parker is Mears' Senior Gas Supervisor for Sedgefield with over 40 years of experience in the sector. He has been involved in the company's 'toolbox talks' programme, which trains frontline staff to identify problems such as cold housing, a lack of furniture or health hazards so that they can signpost tenants to get the relevant support.

He says: “There is a balance to strike, after all the lads are gas service engineers and not social workers. This is why the referral forms are good as they can pass on their concerns and know that they will be dealt with by the communities teams. The lads feel a real sense of duty to the tenant and our operatives have an invaluable role in ensuring tenant wellbeing. We will often see the same tenants year in year out for their annual gas check. In the past before there was any mechanism for flagging concerns you could see deterioration each year. Now, because you can flag concerns like hoarding or abuse, when you return to the property you can see that something has been done about it.”

Summary

Tenant engagement and customer contact is clearly an increasing issue for housing organisations of all types and there is a common understanding that face-to-face contact is ultimately the most effective way of communicating a message to tenants, preferably in their own homes.

While the responses revealed practices ranging from one organisation to the next, the responses prompted several areas of interest for further investigation, which have relevance both for the welfare agenda, and for the sector more widely.

- It is accepted that under the changes to welfare reform (and particularly Universal Credit) tenants will be expected to take on a much higher level of responsibility over their own financial management. The investments made by social landlords to promote **independent living** throughout this transition are therefore of huge interest, with digital inclusion and employment schemes holding particular relevance.
- Better resource allocation is a major concern for both councils and registered social landlords in the context of declining budgets and uncertain income streams. Work

around the **use of data**, as a tool for working more efficiently with tenants is also very important for adapting to welfare reform and dealing with the wider challenges facing the sector. This includes employing more effective **customer segmentation** techniques and a range of communication channels to target different audiences.

- **Partnership working**, particularly with third party contractors, also takes on an added value to housing organisations with the shift to more proactive working with tenants. While social media and online engagement have a role to play, it is recognised that large segments of social housing tenants (particularly older people) cannot currently access information in this way. Face-to-face communication remains vital. As a result, better **use of contact points**, including visits from third party providers has never been a more important issue from both a financial efficiency and a customer satisfaction perspective.

The following section will explore examples of innovative practice, demonstrating ways in which councils and other organisations have made use of some of the tools outlined above to support better relationships between tenants and their social landlords.



4 Innovative practice – case studies

To build a better understanding of current practice in the sector, we undertook a series of interviews with social landlords, including local authorities, Registered Social Landlords and ALMOs. The following case studies illustrate some of the innovative ways in which these organisations are currently working with tenants, and how the relationship between landlord and tenant is being shaped by pressures in the sector.

Moat: building the social contract between landlord and tenant

Moat has a clear approach to developing a balanced relationship with tenants, which acknowledges rights and responsibilities on both sides. One of its established policies is that if a tenant fails to be at home for a pre-arranged appointment or repair visit, they can be charged £20. However, the tenant can charge Moat £20 in turn if its employees do not arrive on time for an appointment.

This approach has been extended to tenancies through the 'Moat Promise', which has been introduced in stages from February 2012. Under this scheme, tenants can apply for 'Five Star membership' if they meet certain criteria for the year.

This includes having a clear rent account, not engaging in anti-social behaviour and generally adhering to all the terms of their tenancy agreement. Five Star membership allows them to access an enhanced offer from Moat, including more choice on planned works, evening/weekend repair visits, local decorating/gardening service and other offers through the 'Moat Marketplace'.

The standard high level of service Moat previously offered to all residents was rebranded Four Star. Residents who continue to adhere to their tenancy automatically receive the Four Star Service. Moat does allow residents who have arrears and are adhering to repayment agreements to stay in the Four Star Service. Conversely, tenants who are repeatedly in breach of their tenancy agreement and do not change their behaviour receive the Three Star service. This is the minimum required service (health and safety repairs). All residents are pre-warned they could fall into the Three Star service and given the opportunity to address the issue. Support is offered to vulnerable residents and individuals can be exempted by frontline staff on the basis of vulnerability.

Between February and June 2013 Moat doubled the number of arrears agreements in place and has had a low level of defaults.

This approach has also been applied to supporting people affected by welfare reform. Moat has a clear 'welfare reform offer', consisting of five areas of work:

- 1) Back to work support for both under-employed and unemployed people.
- 2) A downsizing mobility officer to support people to find a smaller home if they are affected by the Under Occupation Charge.
- 3) A fuel efficiency offer. They provide a Green Doctor service that identifies minor adjustments that will help residents with their bills.
- 4) A Money Advice Plus service, which is a phone service offering benefit support, debt advice and financial support. This is

open to all residents and includes a relationship with Western Union to help individuals find the right bank account options (including 'jam jar' accounts).

5) A lodger pack, aimed at supporting people to take in a lodger, particularly in response to the Under Occupation Charge.

The five-point offer has been extended to all residents. So far Moat has engaged with 75 per cent of tenants, and 50 per cent have signed up to the offer.

Buckinghamshire County Council: a coordinated approach to managing change in a two-tier authority

Buckinghamshire partners have developed a strong partnership approach to responding to the welfare reforms, with the county council taking a co-ordinating lead. As many of the reforms directly affect their local district authorities, building a coordinated response has an additional level of complexity to the position in unitary areas of the country.

Additionally, the welfare reforms affect a wide range of partners, so in Buckinghamshire they have forged new relationships such as those with, and between, registered social landlords in the county.

An active working group has been established with representation from all the relevant stakeholders in Buckinghamshire: county and district council departments, registered social landlords, the Local Enterprise Partnership, JobCentre Plus, the Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB) and the voluntary sector.

This group now has oversight of a coordinated county-wide strategy to responding to welfare reform. Some of their activities have been as follows:

- Working with JobCentre Plus to engage with clients in the most affected areas of the county to better understand their customer journey in relation to welfare benefit.
- Funding Shelter to run training sessions on welfare reform for 250 frontline staff from across the organisations that regularly engage with residents (half from the voluntary sector), to ensure residents do not receive conflicting messages from different agencies. They are now exploring the business case for developing a single engagement tool for all frontline staff.
- Piloting a financial literacy project, run by CAB, to assess what makes the best use of resources in communicating with residents. This includes exploring behaviour change approaches that might encourage higher take-up of group money management support sessions and better engagement during the sessions.
- Commissioning a piece of qualitative research to gain a resident perspective on the impact of the changes on their lives, and how they might respond to these – the outcomes from this will further inform the partnership action plan.
- Planning to review in partnership the whole range of advice and guidance services in the county. It will address any gaps between organisations, and ensure that partners are able to effectively signpost – for example social landlords referring to the CAB for advice.
- To monitor the impact of the work, a shared dashboard is being developed which will show all

partners a range of indicators (for example rent arrears and levels of homelessness) and performance against them. All partners will be asked to identify indicators and will hold responsibility for them.

Thames Valley Housing Association: tailoring communications using customer segmentation

Thames Valley Housing Association has been working to make better use of its data to provide tenants with information and support in a targeted manner.

Initially it cross-referenced data on arrears, anti-social behaviour, demographics, geography and satisfaction levels to identify broad patterns of behaviour and individual circumstances. It used a segmentation tool to identify how different tenants accessed services and information. It followed up with focus groups with tenants falling into different 'segments' to gain a better understanding of how to successfully engage with different groups.

Following this research they completed telephone questionnaires with all 480 people identified as being affected by the Under Occupation Charge by the local authority, collating a large volume of data and responding to people's needs with a targeted package of support. Home visits started in March and generated 53 Discretionary Housing Payments, 22 moves and a high volume of training referrals.

Thames Valley Housing Association has created a clear support offer to tenants including the following.

- A Welfare Benefits Hotline with a 48 hour response time.
- A website hub for information on benefit reform and with tips on budget planning.

- Packs of information for all tenants affected by the Under Occupation Charge or benefit cap.
- A downsizing budget to assist with removals, a tenant welfare budget to help with furniture/white goods and an arrears write off budget for those affected by the Under Occupation Charge.
- A Welfare Reform Arrears Panel (WRAP) to discuss cases of individuals who would like to move but have rent arrears or cannot afford to pay their shortfall as a result of the Under Occupation Charge.
- A lodgers' process including packs from www.sparerooms.co.uk, which they give to residents, containing a sample tenancy agreement and Notice to Quit.
- New relationships with food-banks. They have become voucher holders in most of their local authority areas to support those in crisis.
- A support agency database of around 650 services across local authority borders. This is now being transferred on to the TVH hub site so residents can search for local support services by postcode.

London Borough of Lambeth: supporting tenants into employment

In October 2012, the London Borough of Lambeth established a cross-agency team to pro-actively make contact with and offer support to the 550 or so households in the borough that are seeing housing benefit reductions associated with the weekly cap. The team contains four Housing Options

staff, a Job Centre Plus secondee, a secondee from ALMO Lambeth Living, a full-time benefits advisor from the Every Pound Counts Team and three employment support workers to help affected families into work. Recently it has secured funding from DWP's Flexible Support Fund to add two more employment support workers to bring the total to five.

The team has worked pro-actively to make contact with those affected, including door knocking, arranging evening and weekend home visits and attending Children's Centres to ensure that they reach the appropriate people.

The employment workers have already supported 26 people into work, the benefits advisor has a caseload of 28 people and others are being worked with to move house, renegotiate rents with their landlord or pay some of the shortfall themselves.

As part of this programme of work, they organised a jobs fair for benefit cap affected households and engaged the services of a local enterprise support agency to help up to 20 affected households move into self-employment.

Lambeth has also funded a local housing charity – Broadway Housing and Support – to establish a lodgings service working exclusively with those affected by the under-occupation charge.

Broadway already ran a social lettings agency and was able to help residents in attracting and vetting lodgers, in understanding their responsibilities and in preparing their spare room.

Referrals of interested/appropriate households come to Broadway from Lambeth Living and from housing association partners, while suitable lodgers are referred to the scheme from Housing Options, typically in response to changes to the Shared Accommodation Rate.

First Wessex: the Green Doctor scheme

First Wessex housing association recognises that squeezed living standards, low wages, and welfare changes are important drivers of change in social housing. It is particularly concerned about the potential impact of climate change and addressing low levels of energy efficiency in its existing homes to help keep running costs for its customers affordable.

In partnership with Groundwork, an environmental regeneration charity, First Wessex has been running a Green Doctor scheme. Teams visit tenants in their homes to assess the features, services, appliances and understand how the resident controls and uses these. It follows up by writing a 'prescription' of recommendations for more energy and water efficient use of the home to reduce waste and help the residents to cut their running costs in the process. Basic energy and water saving devices are fitted during the visit and if any substantial improvements are also required, such as insulation and heating, these are added to a future planned maintenance programme.

Three visits are undertaken at each home during a 12-month period. The teams take meter readings of gas, electricity, and water usage during each visit, which they pass on to the housing association for simple monitoring purposes. They also use the visits to assess for wider issues, such as fuel poverty and the possibility of rent arrears. First Wessex can then offer tenants advice and assistance. The scheme is moving in-house in the Autumn, to be administered directly by First Wessex, and will be called the Green Living Advisor service.

By emphasising the money that can be saved through energy efficiency advice and adaptations, First Wessex hopes to develop stronger relationships and to encourage wider uptake of the service among customers. Community champions are being

trained in order to share information with other tenants and to demonstrate how much money can be saved. First Wessex is also introducing competitions to encourage more residents to sign up.

City West Housing Trust: a multi-media communications strategy

City West is a not-for-profit organisation and owns 14,600 homes across West Salford. It took a multi-media approach to communicating the messages of welfare reform to its tenants. By using a range of communication channels City West has been able to open a dialogue with members of the community who are furthest from engagement (there are low levels of adult literacy and numeracy in some of its neighbourhoods). The campaign has made use of some of the following techniques.

- An infographic DVD on the welfare reforms, highlighting the likely numbers of people affected in Salford and what the effects may be.
- Creation of 'Creature Comforts' style brand to ensure a cohesive, instantly recognisable campaign. This was carried across all communication channels. Its YouTube videos received more than 965 views.
- A creative animated video, featuring frank, unscripted conversations with real tenants, which was sent to 4,000 customers and posted online. A second, tackling Universal Credit has also been developed. These were created following customer feedback requesting something more dynamic than the initial DVD.
- SMS texts to target groups of customers.
- A dedicated welfare reform section on its website is signposted to by

Twitter and Facebook and has received more than 4,300 hits. A new Facebook page allows customers to discuss mutually exchanging properties.

- An information roadshow with the local radio station, holding drop-in sessions and door knocking.
- Advice letters sent to over 4,000 households.
- Housing Benefit advice drop-in sessions, which have so far attracted over 225 customers.
- Home visits to more than 400 households.

City West worked with tenant panels on its communication materials to ensure the messages were clear and the communications were targeted to different groups of tenants. Using the data it gathered, every tenant due to be affected was tagged as either 'coping' or 'struggling' in relation to the welfare reform change in question, allowing for more tailored messaging. Direct advice to tenants via letters, text messages and emails, was then personalised accordingly.

City West's Welfare Reform Dashboard provides up-to-date intelligence on who is affected by the changes and has helped to tailor the campaign to individual needs and better target communications. 101 customers have downsized since April 2013 and 26 mutual exchanges have been agreed.

livin: the 'Monkey' project

livin is a registered housing provider which was established in 2009 following a stock transfer from Sedgefield Borough Council. livin has received funding from the Big Lottery to support the Monkey project: a

five-year financial inclusion programme backed by the National Housing Federation. It operates as a partnership of seven registered providers and 10 voluntary sector bodies led by livin. It is aimed at all new tenants and existing tenants aged between 16 and 25.

The project is designed around three themes of finance, fuel and furniture which includes help with obtaining and setting up bank and saving accounts, debt management, household incomes and budgeting as well as sourcing the best deals on affordable furniture and fuel solutions and low interest, affordable finance. It aims to support 20,000 beneficiaries over five years with support to help tenants to sustain their housing tenancy.

The scheme has had significant interest from tenants, especially from younger participants. As they become more confident in the scheme, they are beginning to run workshops themselves and operate as champions in their communities.

livin have found that many tenants would prefer to speak to someone in their own community about financial concerns, and are now in the process of identifying and training neighbourhood volunteers as welfare champions.

livin recognises that they must be more proactive and find different ways of communicating with different tenants, rather than relying solely on residents panels and traditional forms of consultation.

The changes as a result of welfare reform have given this work a sense of urgency, but it was already a strong element of their community cohesion agenda.

This includes making better use of data and contact points with residents. Working with its repairs and maintenance contractor Mears, they have now delivered 'toolbox talks' with frontline staff of third party

contractors such as repairs and maintenance workers. They find that tenants are sometimes more willing to speak freely with these staff than with representatives of the landlord.

Executive Director of Mears Group Alan Long commented:

"Mears is continually looking for new ways to offer value for money to our clients and tenants. One area worthy of further exploration is how RSLs can make better use of contractor contact points – after all we know that face to face communication is the most effective form of communication and our staff have tens of thousands of interactions with residents every year. Of course this should not adversely impact on the substantive reason for being at a property but more can be done to leverage this resource. Ideally we would be thinking about this at the time of tender so that there is a culture of contractors reinforcing clients key messages from the start of a contract."

Mears' Contract Management System: connecting contact points

Mears has developed a technology system that enables them to manage and use their customer contact points effectively.

As suppliers of maintenance services to various councils and housing associations, it is in regular contact with a variety of clients and tenants. Using technology in a smart way can help to make these services more responsive and adaptable to the needs of tenants.

The Mears Contract Management (MCM) is used on a handheld device that is fully integrated with the Mears IT system. This allows staff to:

- carry out their duties remotely
- report repairs
- contact clients
- manage labour and supplies
- updates client information
- access appointment details
- keep in regular contact with supervisors.

The technology also helps Mears to conduct full performance monitoring and to access diaries and schedules because it is fully synchronised with the back office system.

It also links with all stages of the supply chain so that stocks can be replenished in real time and is adaptable enough that staff can visit any supplier branch to collect materials.

Mears uses the system on all of its outsourced contracts and work with other clients so the partnerships are well coordinated. The database is also available to clients so it can be accessed or even integrated with its own systems.

This means that work is not duplicated and landlords can build a useful picture of their tenants. Crucially, this is beneficial to the residents who use the services because it makes the contact between the two parties as efficient as possible.

It is important that communication works both ways and residents are able to report repairs, confirm or change appointments, and receive receipts of transactions by text message.

Automatic text messages are also used to remind residents of upcoming appointments, which has reduced the number 'no access' visits.

The MCM is adapted and refined for each client and the needs of residents are considered in order to improve the service.

Plus Dane: working with community champions

Plus Dane, a housing association with 18,000 properties across Merseyside, Cheshire East, and Cheshire West, has made significant shifts in its engagement with tenants in order to prepare for the full impact of the benefit changes. The first of these involved a shift in its outreach strategy.

- It has set up a scheme training community champions to ensure that tenants are aware what the impacts of the Under Occupation Charge will be, to provide advice, and to liaise between tenants and Plus Dane.
- The champions are predominantly residents who are themselves affected by the charge and are keen to assist others as much as possible. It is a source of pride for many of the participants and one commented: "At our first training session we found out more about the changes and the effects they will have and it brought home the importance of ensuring that people are prepared. There's a real will from the group to do all we can to help."
- An important aspect of Plus Dane's engagement approach is face-to-face contact, which the community champions allow it to deliver and can relate it specifically to the needs of the tenants in question because a big part of what the volunteers do is sharing their journey.
- The champions also play a public relations role for Plus Dane. They have ensured a far higher turnout at Plus Dane's events than it had achieved previously, as well as speaking at conferences and participating in the company's partnership work.

Easthall Park: setting up a community bank

As a housing association with tenants across East Glasgow, Easthall Park has been strongly affected by the welfare changes.

It has concerns about maintaining its income levels, while also ensuring support and engagement to those who need it, and has chosen to take an active stance on working with tenants.

- It has secured funding from the Big Lottery in order to set up a community bank in its offices. The banking facilities will allow tenants who do not have an account and do not use the Post Office, to set up simple accounts and direct debit transfers to pay their rent.
- As well as helping to facilitate tenants making their payments on time, this allows Easthall to provide welfare rights advice, financial assistance, budgetary training, and, if it is required, to make sure that tenants are aware of their disposable income.
- Easthall has shared the scheme through the Equality Efficiency Forum, which brings together local authorities and registered social landlords.
- It has combined its welfare work with its outreach and data gathering and has ensured that all those affected by the bedroom tax have been visited in person and offered assistance and advice packages. Easthall has had to hire extra staff and give existing staff greater responsibility to enable this to happen.

Plus Dane: supporting staff to set up bank accounts for tenants

Plus Dane's engagement strategy has so far focused on raising awareness of the approaching welfare changes among tenants.

While it avoids initiatives that seek to 'manage' the behaviour of their tenants, Plus Dane has been proactive in setting up practical mechanisms to facilitate the changes tenants will have to make to adjust to welfare reform.

- In initial scoping surveys, carried out earlier this year, access to bank accounts was felt to be an important issue for tenants, particularly in the context of direct payments under Universal Credit.
- In response, Plus Dane has trained eight members of staff to set up bank accounts for tenants. The staff are FSA certified and are able to set accounts up in peoples' homes and offices. There has been a mixed response from residents so far, but it is building momentum as suspicion about the purpose of the scheme subsides.
- Plus Dane has used Global Information Systems (GIS) mapping to identify where there are high numbers of residents without accounts, and to ensure that its work is targeted where there is the most need.

Shropshire Council: understanding tenant profiles

As a pilot authority for Direct Payments, Shropshire Council was keen to explore how the reform would work in a large, rural area, where infrastructure is dispersed and access to the internet limited.

There was an early recognition that a better understanding of tenants would be central to this challenge, so in order to develop a more targeted approach, the council began to carry out pre-tenancy work with new tenants.

This involved evaluation and assessment of individual needs at the very beginning of the relationship and close monitoring of how these developed during the first few months of the tenancy.

The work has been vital for ensuring targeted support and proper signposting at important stages in the tenancy.

This has fed into further work documenting 'tenant journeys'. By recording the conversations between tenants and officers, the council has developed training resources, which it uses to improve engagement. It has also made changes to the workforce to engage hard to reach tenants and have employed more staff.

Shropshire has developed more sophisticated ways of categorising tenants, allowing it to meet tenant needs more effectively. For example, it found that some of the most serious financial challenges were faced by those who are already in work.

As a result the council changed its strategy allowing it to engage with those who are in work and struggling with payments – this includes deploying some officers/advisers to work outside normal 9-5 hours.

Shropshire has set up residents' workshops across the region, initially to respond to problems associated with arrears. These usually take the form of discussion groups, which allow residents to share concerns and experiences.

Promoting discussion has helped tenants to keep informed and to understand their options, but has also contributed to developing neighbourhood networks and community cohesion.

asert : tenants talking to tenants

asert was set up to provide an independent auditing service for social landlords and third party providers. Taking the view that the best people to scrutinise services are the service users themselves it recruits through residents' and tenants' associations across the country. Those tenants are fully trained and employed to carry out inspections, feedback surveys, and customer insight analysis.

This provides opportunities for employment opportunities but also an effective means of making contact with residents, who are more likely to talk candidly with someone that relates to them, or can sympathise with their situation, than with a contractor.

A great deal of asert's work involves checking that clients' key performance indicators are met. One recent project was carried out on behalf of the energy supplier E-on. asert designed a tenant-friendly survey to assess the impact of E-on's funding to help social landlords meet carbon emissions reduction targets. It focuses on a wide variety of housing concerns, including sustainability, energy efficiency, standards, and domestic social care.

The company is based in Manchester, though it works and recruits from all over England. Its strength lies in the skill level of its recruits, as well as the average of 10,000 customer contacts they have a month, across 133,000 homes.

Having analysed trends and spotted significant patterns, asert feeds back to contractors and landlords. They also devise solutions to the problems that are raised and engage with a wide range of stakeholders to ensure that tenants' concerns are incorporated into wider development plans.

The organisation is currently working with Sustainable Homes and is about to expand its activity to encompass Scotland and the

North East. It is expected that Universal Credit and other welfare changes will have an impact on the work that they do.

The bulk of asert staff are tenants and so they are particularly well placed to explain the changes and to help make the potential consequences understood by those who will be affected. Projects are delivered in a way that tenants will understand and engage with because the staff have had similar experiences. One tenant remarked: “At last we can talk to someone who understands our needs.”

Home Group: communication insight research project

Housing association and care and support provider Home Group wanted to understand how to establish more effective two way communications with specific segments of its customers and clients.

To set a firm foundation for their relationship with customers, it felt it was particularly important to gain feedback on how they wanted to communicate with Home Group, and whether they felt they were being listened to by the organisation. It was also keen to explore the current perceptions of Home Group.

To build an understanding of these issues, it commissioned behaviour change specialists ICE Creates to undertake a detailed insight research project. The target audience for the

research consisted of both customers (tenants), currently living in homes owned by Home Group and clients (service users) currently receiving care and support.

Home Group has now completed a comprehensive segmentation exercise for its customer groups, providing an excellent foundation for the deeper, qualitative insight work carried out through focus groups and one to one interviews. The research seeks to gain understanding in relation to message tone and style, two-way communication and preferred communications style and whether or not these methods need to change according to the messages being disseminated.

These case studies highlight a range of interesting approaches to working with tenants on the part of social landlords. Many examples respond to the current policy environment, and particularly to welfare reform; however, they also reflect a broader recognition among landlords of the need to use more intelligent and proactive strategies for working with their tenants.

A one-size-fits-all approach will fail to reach those who most need to access advice and support. Equally, a one sided approach to delivering information and services will not empower tenants to seek the help they need to live independent and fulfilling lives. Social landlords will need to use all the tools at their disposal to respond to this challenge, and to find effective and nuanced ways of engaging with residents at a time of increasingly limited resources.



5 Recommendations

This report has argued that there is a pressing need for housing organisations to think seriously and creatively about how they engage their tenants. The survey in this report has shown that there is an aspiration to do so within these organisations, and the case studies have outlined some of the ways in which this is already happening. Our recommendations will draw upon the case studies in the previous section to identify some areas of best practice for social landlords.

From transactional to participative relationships

The key message of the case studies is that landlords can no longer afford to take a 'one-size-fits-all' approach to communication with their tenants. They will have to collaborate and coproduce solutions to the problems faced by individuals, households

and communities if they are to adapt flexibly to their immediate and future challenges. This relates especially to those individuals often defined as 'hard to reach', who may need support, but are unlikely to respond to traditional forms of communication and engagement.

Future engagement cannot rely on transactional relationships; it must be proactive and participative and empower stronger forms of citizenship in all communities. It is important to engage all partners behind a common goal and to align values and objectives behind a shared vision. Successful change will require thinking outside the parameters of individual organisations and viewing relationships with stakeholders as joint ventures. As we have seen, many organisations are already on this journey as part of their wider approach to tenant participation. The following four practical recommendations outline the main characteristics of this approach.

Recommendation 1: Invest in sustainable tenant-landlord relationships

Three-quarters of respondents to our survey agreed that residents will need additional advice and support services in future, and around six out of 10 had seen their budgets increase this year in response.

There is recognition, however, that resources in this area are limited. Where possible, tenant engagement must invest in resilience, and focus on giving tenants the tools they need to support independent lifestyles. Digital inclusion strategies, energy efficiency schemes, employment brokerage programmes, coordinated financial advice/support and referrals to community networks all have a role to play.

See: Moat's welfare reform offer; First Wessex Housing Association's Green Doctor scheme; Plus Dane's work on new bank accounts for tenants; Easthall Park's community bank; LB Lambeth's employment work

Recommendation 2: Maximise the value of customer contact points

Mapping the formal contact points between tenant and landlord is a crucial first step to delivering coordinated and clear communications. This includes relationships with third parties, such as contractors and the voluntary sector who regularly engage with tenants. Too often people receive mixed messages from different sources on important information. Frontline members of staff have a key role to play in signposting tenants to appropriate services and in flagging up potential problems, so a multi-agency approach can make a real difference. According to the results of our survey, only a quarter of respondents were currently making use of contact points between their tenants and third party contractors in this way.

See: livin's 'toolbox talks'; Buckinghamshire County Council's multi-agency shared dashboard; LB Lambeth's cross-agency benefit cap advice team; Mears' Contract Management System

Recommendation 3: Identify community champions

While the coordination of customer contact points can be useful in sharing important messages and preventing crises, it is recognised that often people will be more likely to engage with a member of their own community than with 'authority' figures such as landlords, particularly in the context of welfare and finance. Identifying champions within the community who can provide good information and support is an important way of reaching those groups who are furthest from engagement with their landlord.

Respondents to our survey saw face-to-face contact as the most effective form of communication with tenants, but the initial contact need not necessarily be a formal intervention. By ensuring that people in trusted positions in a community are familiar with the availability of support and guidance, social landlords can engage indirectly with those who may be in most need of help.

See: Plus Dane's community champion work; livin's Monkey project

Recommendation 4: Target communications using data segmentation

Local authorities, registered social landlords and their partner organisations hold vast quantities of data about tenants and their use of services. Making sure that there are intelligent systems in place for collecting, analysing, and sharing that data to support more effective communications is key to engaging differently with different sections of the community.

Data segmentation techniques, supported by on-going engagement and research in the form of focus groups, interviews and other tenant participation activity, can help to identify those in need of specific forms of support. Trialling and testing different communication channels with tenants can also pinpoint the best means of sharing information with different groups, allowing for more nuanced and targeted use of resources and avoiding ineffective communication strategies.

See: City West Housing Trust's multi-media communications strategy; Thames Valley Housing Association's data segmentation tool; Home Group's communication insights research; Shropshire Council's use of 'tenant journeys'

Conclusion

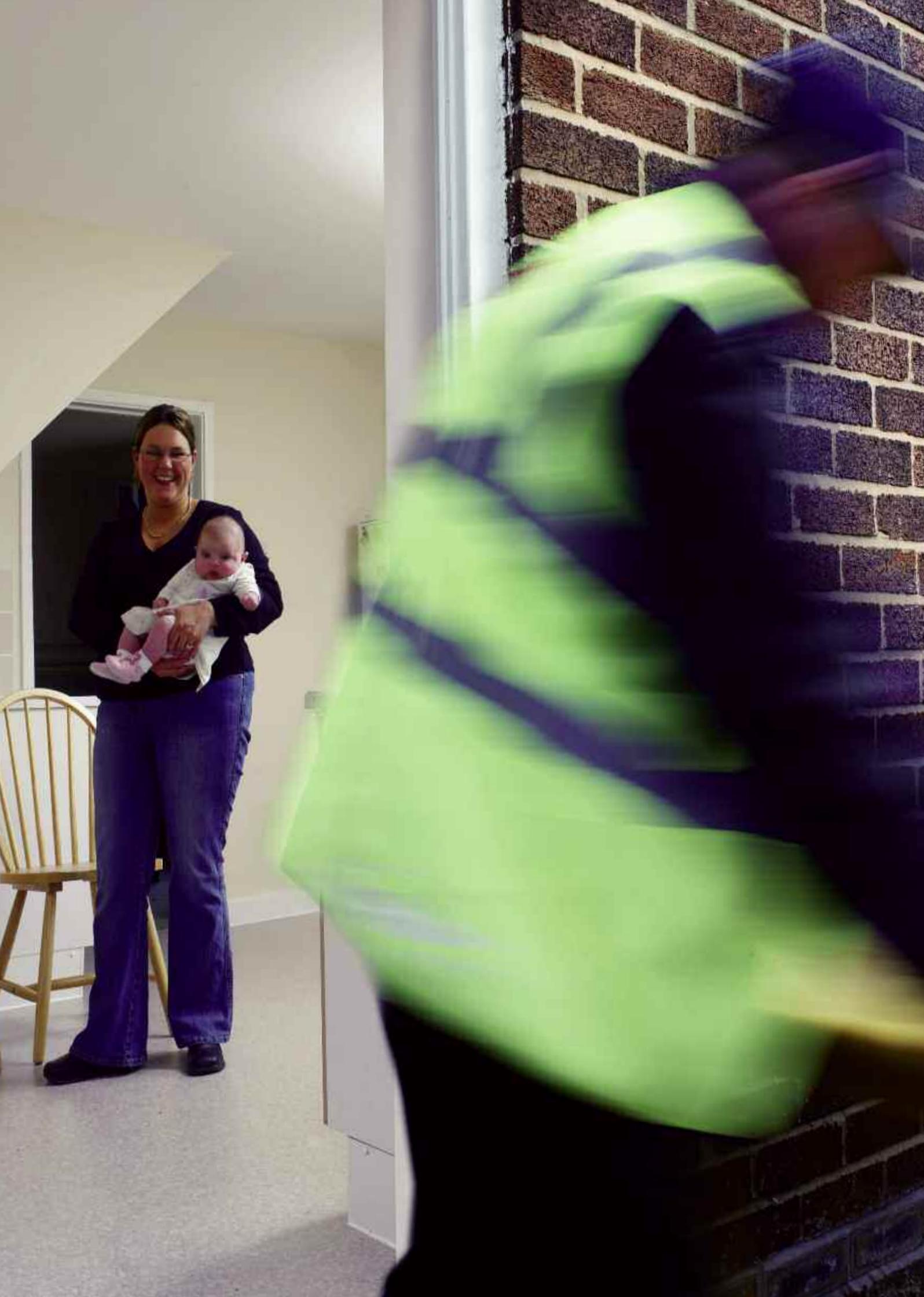
The relationship between social landlords and their tenants is undergoing a period of sustained and fundamental change. This is a direct result not only of a shifting welfare landscape, but of long-term challenges associated with the growing gap between demand for services and availability of resources.

As a consequence, many social landlords are moving away from purely transactional relationships with their tenants and employing new and proactive ways of engaging them in meaningful conversations, particularly those who have been furthest away from engagement in the past. This may take the form of more targeted

communication strategies, of community resilience work, of more efficient partnership working or of empowering community champions.

What is certain is that if we are to adapt successfully to the challenges we face in future as a society, our work must be supported by an active, flexible and open dialogue between the citizen and the state. Nowhere is this more true, in these challenging times, than in the relationships between social landlords and their tenants.

We hope that this report will provide practical support to those working in this arena and contribute to the debate on how new and participative forms of engagement can best be achieved.



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The LGiU is a think tank and local authority membership organisation. Our mission is to strengthen local democracy to put citizens in control of their own lives, communities and local services. We work with local councils and other public services providers, along with a wider network of public, private and third sector organisations.

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Mears is the leading social housing repairs and maintenance provider in the UK and a major presence in the domiciliary care market – bringing the highest standards of care to people and their homes.

Partnering with clients, 17,000 Mears Group employees maintain, repair and upgrade people's homes, care for individuals and work in communities across the country – from inner city estates to remote rural villages. For more information, please contact Abigail Lock at Abigail.Lock@mearsgroup.co.uk

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