

Training session 01

Know your rights to engage & be heard

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These notes are part of a series of 8 training sessions

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- 03 Resident panels
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Introduction

Problems with your home or in your area cannot be fixed if they are not reported/if your landlord doesn't know about them. Some residents may find themselves not feeling confident to engage with their landlord or not being reached out to by their landlord.

It's not just about having a voice, but making sure that the voice is heard. As said by the head of housing services at one of the large London local authorities:

'When asked what was the one thing which would improve housing services engagement with our residents, the most popular answer was 'listening to our views/concerns/complaints/suggestions', followed by 'better communication'.

Here are some quotes from residents when asked what they thought about getting their views across to their landlord:

'To encourage Housing Associations to LISTEN to what its tenants have to say, and then for them to ACT upon what those tenants have said. Housing Associations far too often simply DO WHAT THEY WANT and were going to do anyway, WITHOUT taking a BLIND BIT OF NOTICE of what their tenants have been telling them FOR YEARS. ' (note the capital letters)

'Strength in numbers. If these are common issues that aren't being resolved. Having more tenants coming together to raise awareness about it would be really positive. The tenants would feel more listened to with more voices.'

'More collective views, possibly leading to stronger communities'

'It only works if the points put forward are truly used as part of the decision-making'

Getting your views across where you live

The International Customer Service Survey covering a wide range of service industries ranks 11 things that matter to customers (in any industry) when there's a problem with a product or service. Many people are surprised to see that fixing the source of a complaint (for example, by replacing or repairing the faulty item) comes seventh.

The top six are all about what might be regarded as the 'soft side' of customer relations: speed, apology, treatment, acknowledgement, explanation and assurance that the problem won't reoccur.

In a recent survey of social housing residents across the whole of Wales, when people were asked about the sort of dialogue they want with their landlord, '*listening*' and '*building relationships*' came top of the list. Residents want to be properly informed, and to have the chance to give their views.

People said that '*trust and respect*' are fundamental and that these depend on the '*culture*' of the landlord organisation. Being successful in building trust and respect starts with the approach of staff and the leadership of the organisation.

How would you get your views to be heard by your landlord?

Understand how landlords make decisions

Local authorities

Local councils, which is the most common type of local authority, are made up of councillors who are elected by the public in local elections. Councillors work with local people and partners, such as local businesses and other organisations, to agree and deliver on local priorities. Most local authorities in England are run by a leader and cabinet of councillors from the majority party or a coalition of parties in cases of no overall control.

Most council services are mandatory. This means that the council must do them because they are under a duty to do so by law. Some council services and functions are discretionary. These are services a council can choose to provide but does not have to. They are varied, ranging from large economic regeneration projects at one end of the scale, to the removal of wasp nests at the other.

Local councils are usually responsible for the following main services:

- Schools
- Social care
- Rubbish collection
- Recycling
- Council Tax collections
- Housing
- Planning applications

The full council (a meeting of all council members) is responsible for all decisions. But in practice, most of the work is given to smaller groups of councillors or council officers (paid staff).

Every council must publish:

- details of when key decisions will be taken
- papers of meetings – at least 5 working days beforehand
- minutes of meetings – showing the decisions that were made

These are all available on the council's website.

In theory, the full council – the meeting of all councillors – is responsible for all decisions made in your council. In practice, most decisions are delegated to smaller groups of councillors, either through a cabinet system, a committee system or a combination of both.

Some councils have an elected mayor. They're responsible for the day-to-day running of local services. Councils can have both elected and civic mayors.

In councils that have a cabinet system, decisions are made by the councillor who has been appointed Leader of the Council or the Elected Mayor, along with the other councillors that they appoint to their cabinet.

Councils that have a committee system work in a slightly different way. These councils still have an elected Leader, but many decisions are made by committees (e.g. the Housing Committee) which are made up of councillors proportionate to their political party's representation in the council.

Some councils have a hybrid of both cabinet and committee system.

Council officers are staff members who are responsible for the day-to-day running of your council. Unlike councillors, they are not elected. Councils are usually run by a Chief Executive, Senior Management Team and individual members of staff who are usually responsible for certain issues – for example, a Housing Officer.

Who to approach

So now you know who makes decisions in your council, you need to decide who to approach about your issue.

Councillors aren't paid for their role and often have other jobs as well as being a councillor, so you may find they're very busy. But it's also important to remember that they were elected by you – the local people – and so have a duty, as well as a desire, to do their best for your community, which means you're already starting with a shared goal. If you can find the right person to talk to and strike up a good relationship you're already on the right track – even if you still feel you know very little about councils.

So, who should you approach?

Who you'll approach will depend on your council and whether you already have a pre-existing relationship with a councillor or a local council officer. Even if they're not the right person to speak to, they should be able to point you in the right direction.

If you don't know who to approach, you can use the council's website to find out who's best placed to help you.

If you're struggling to find out who you should speak to, you're best placed going straight to your council leader – this will help put your issue on their radar and they will be able to signpost you to the right person to talk to.

The key thing is to make contact. Even if it's not the right person initially, it's great to build up relationships and make contacts. You'll be able to find all the contact details for your local councillors on your council's website.

Housing Associations

Housing associations are not-for-profit organisations set up to provide affordable homes and support local communities. They don't make profits for shareholders. Instead, **they invest all the income they make into delivering on their social purpose.**

Housing associations generally run services for the communities that they work in. Many provide local people with training, advice, community hubs, youth schemes, and apprenticeships. They work closely with local authorities and residents to help create a thriving environment for the community.

Housing associations are run by a committee or board, who are often volunteer but can be remunerated. These sometimes include residents so that they have a say in how their homes are run. The board will work closely with local authorities in order to meet housing needs.

The board is responsible for making the policy decisions for the association, they are not involved in discussing the day-to-day running of the association. Just like councils, housing associations employ staff members who are responsible for the day-to-day running of the organisation. Housing Associations are usually run by a Chief Executive, Senior Management Team and individual members of staff who are usually responsible for certain issues – for example, a Housing Officer.

Although independent, housing associations are regulated by the government. The Regulator of Social Housing sets both 'consumer' and 'economic' regulatory standards for registered providers of social housing. The Regulator takes a proactive approach to regulating its economic standards with a particular focus on governance and financial viability.

Housing associations commonly receive public funding. They are now the country's major providers of new housing for rent, while many also run shared ownership schemes to help those who cannot afford to buy a home outright.

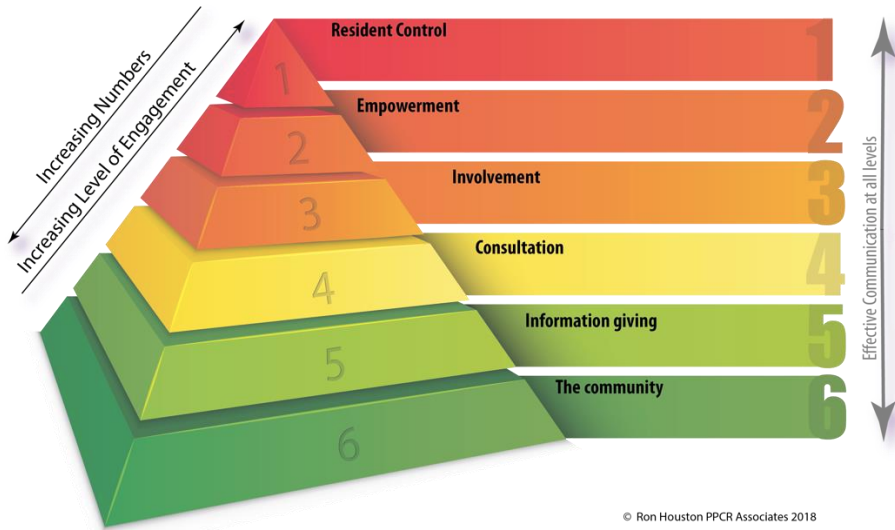
What's the difference between housing association and council housing?

The main difference is that council housing is provided directly by the local government, while housing associations are private, not-for-profit companies. Housing associations are responsible for the provision and maintenance of their housing stock, with residents receiving financial support to rent or buy their home.

Resident and community engagement

The Engagement Pyramid

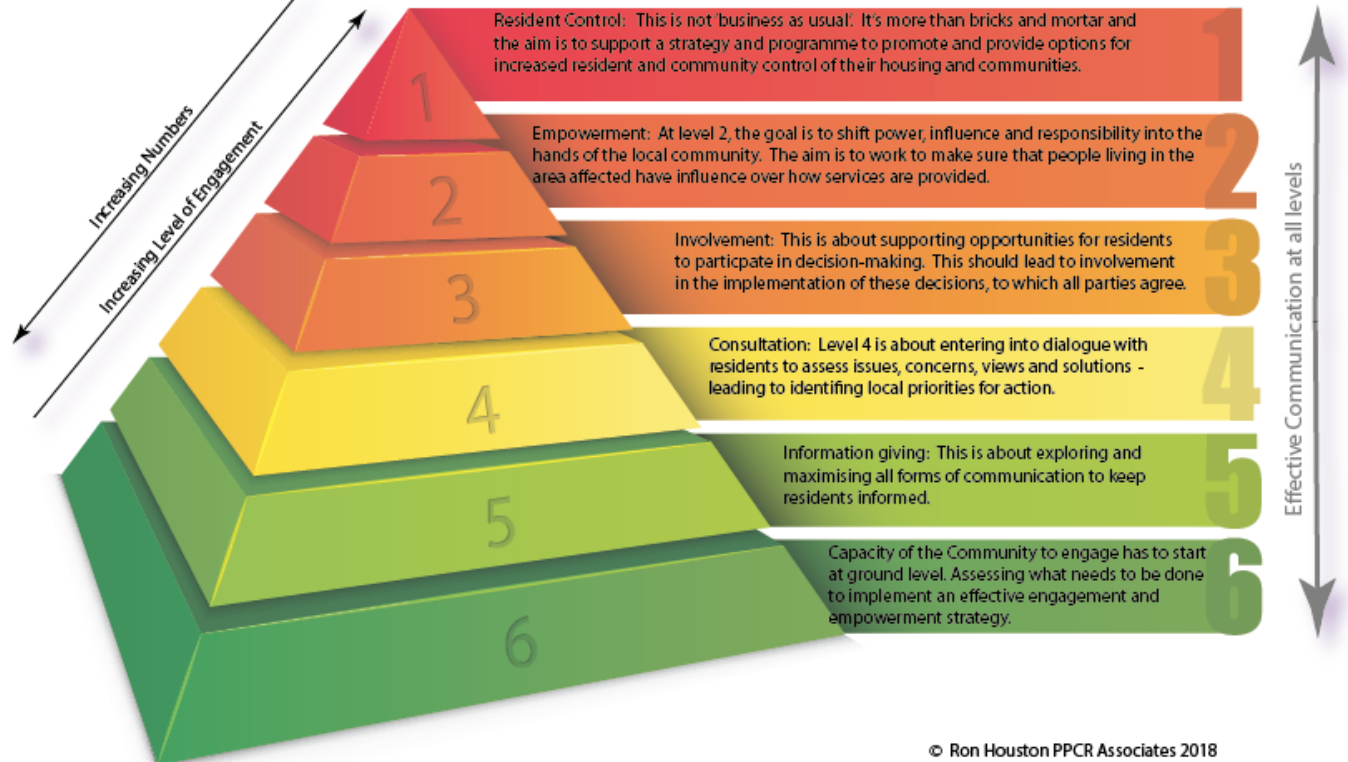
People choose to get involved at different levels, the numbers will decrease as the level increases



Further explanation

The Engagement Pyramid

People choose to get involved at different levels, the numbers will decrease as the level increases - shaped just like a pyramid. As in a physical pyramid, all parts must be supported and each level depends one on another. This starts with supporting the capacity of the community to engage. In maximising engagement the aim is to reach and appeal to the whole audience. People choose to engage or not. All needs must be identified and barriers removed so that people can take part.



Trying to define "community engagement" may be as hard as the actual process of doing it. People use the term community engagement in different ways.

Let's start with wikipedia:

'Community engagement is a process where individuals and community benefit organisations build ongoing relationships for the purpose of applying a collective vision for the benefit of a community.'

Communities, as we generally like to think of them, generally consist of a group of people that share some kind of common bond. You can have a community of place – people living in the same area, or a community of interest -people sharing a belief, goal or even hobby. At its most basic, however, communities deal with a group or set of people that share at least one common characteristic.

Let's look at a bit more detail at community engagement:

Put simply, community engagement is the participation of members of a community in assessing, planning, implementing, and evaluating solutions to problems that affect them.

There's been a lot of theory written about community engagement, but for now let's start with the core building blocks:

- People get information about an issue
- Consultation about the issue within the community
- People deciding together what to do about an issue
- People acting together to support a community initiative

It is important to understand that community engagement seeks to help not just individuals, but the whole community. Community engagement, can come in many shapes and sizes, but regardless of all the methods, the underlying goal, the benefit of a community, is the same.

It is also important to emphasise that successful community engagement not only seeks to make one or two changes, but a series of sustainable changes that make a difference. Successful community engagement means building bridges between communities that would otherwise never be made. It is in these bridges that the hope of beneficial change emerges and the success of community engagement is based.

How to make resident influence work where you live?

It's worth asking yourself and your neighbours some straight questions

- What are we trying to achieve?
- What do we have to do to get there?

Getting started

Here are some pointers to get you started:

- Talk to your neighbours in your area, find out if other people are concerned about the issue(s).
- Talk to as many people as you can in as many ways as possible. Think of what these might be?
- Is help available, from your landlord, other groups in the area, is there a residents' association. Think of what help you might get where you live?

Next steps

- Where next do you take the issues....your landlord, local councillor, leader of the council, MP?
- Organise a public event or meeting, local people can present their views to those who make decisions.
- Decide what you want to do next.

Key shifts

Social Housing White Paper

New government legislation aimed at empowering residents to have their voices heard so that their landlords are held to account. The white paper presents a charter setting out seven commitments that social housing residents should be able to expect from their landlord.

1. To be safe in your home.
2. To know how your landlord is performing, including on repairs, complaints and safety, and how it spends its money.
3. To have your complaints dealt with promptly and fairly, with access to a strong Ombudsman.
4. To be treated with respect, backed by a strong consumer regulator and improved consumer standards for tenants.
5. To have your voice heard by your landlord.
6. To have a good quality home and neighbourhood to live in, with your landlord keeping your home in good repair.
7. The government will ensure social housing can support people to take their first step to ownership.

The white paper also includes a range of other measures and reforms:

- A reformed Regulator of Social Housing with new consumer regulation.
- The Regulator to inspect organisations with over 1,000 homes at least once every four years to review compliance with the consumer standards.
- A strengthened Housing Ombudsman which allows tenants easier access and speeds up complaint resolution.
- A series of key performance indicators (KPIs) that landlords will be required to report against, with proposed satisfaction measures on repairs, safety, complaints, engagement and neighbourhood management.
- A new accountable person for safety, and consumer standards, within each landlord.
- An expectation that tenants should be able to access key information from their landlord.
- An intention to tackle anti-social behaviour by clarifying the roles of different agencies and signposting who can support residents.

Other key shifts

- See the Person Campaign
- Tackling stigma and celebrate thriving communities
- Together with Tenants (National Housing Federation (NHF))
- A Together with Tenants charter
- A requirement in the NHF's code of governance for housing association boards to be accountable to their tenants and residents
- Tenant and resident oversight and scrutiny of the charter
- A closer link with regulation