

# Councils with ALMOs Group

**The role of councils in ensuring quality and effective Tenant Engagement by their ALMOs**

**June 2020**





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## 1. Introduction and aims of review

Tpas was commissioned by Councils with ALMOs Group (CWAG) to undertake a piece of work looking specifically at the way tenant engagement is delivered, where this function has been delegated to an Arms-Length Management Organisation (ALMO) and how councils should provide robust oversight and monitoring.

Tenant engagement is an area where councils are keen to improve performance and ensure their engagement offer reflects the best practice within the sector.

In the past, many councils may have delegated this activity to the ALMO with little direct involvement. This project will look to identify and address the particular issues and challenges for councils in ensuring that the tenant engagement arrangements in their area are working effectively and are appropriately focused and meaningful.

This report should be used as an important resource to encourage a partnership approach between councils and their ALMOs, an understanding of the wider strategic context of engagement and how this translates to the engagement arrangements in place within local areas.

It is an opportunity to set out key roles and responsibilities around the delivery of engagement as part of a wider approach to improve performance, and for councils to establish a robust framework to provide strategic oversight and supplement the monitoring of their ALMOs, alongside the Management Agreement.

The key aim of this project is to provide a toolkit for councils to ensure that tenant engagement is sufficiently covered in contractual arrangements with the ALMO and how they can ensure their ALMOs are complying with management agreements, regulatory and legislative standards and have meaningful tenant engagement embedded into the organisational culture.



## 2. Background

ALMOs were first established as not-for-profit companies in 2002 to manage housing on behalf of their council. Many councils chose to set up ALMOs as a way to access Decent Homes funding, the alternative being stock transfer to a housing association.

CWAG began as an informal grouping of officers from councils that had set up ALMOs, meeting to share good practice and support in the early days of the establishment of the ALMO model. The National Federation of ALMOs (NFA) was established in 2003 to represent the interests of ALMOs at national level through lobbying and negotiation with central Government on their behalf.

In 2007, the group moved to formalise its structure and role, becoming a Special Interest Group of the Local Government Association. Since then the group has been working to ensure that the interests of councils with ALMOs are fully recognised in wider policy proposals and debates.

ALMOs are wholly owned local authority companies. The ALMO Board is responsible for agreeing the strategic direction of the company and holding its executive team to account on delivery and performance. The executive team are responsible for delivering the service and meeting the performance targets agreed with the Board and the council, as well as meeting legal and regulatory responsibilities, including health and safety and building regulation.

Each ALMO has a management agreement with its council that sets out the specific services it will undertake. The Council is responsible for monitoring that agreement and the performance of the ALMO. In the event of under-performance or serious concerns with services, the council will normally put in place an improvement plan and if not met, has the ultimate sanction of bringing the service back in-house and dissolving the ALMO.



### 3. Methodology

#### Online Survey

An initial short survey was emailed to CWAG members as a starting point for the research. The NFA and CWAG promoted the survey to their members and 34 completed surveys were received (19 responses were received from ALMOs and 15 responses from councils).

#### Telephone Calls

Following on from the survey, Tpas undertook telephone calls with 10 organisations across the councils and ALMOs breakdown as above.

#### Roundtable event

A roundtable event was held in London, hosted by Tower Hamlets Homes. Representatives from four organisations attended and talked in greater depth about:

- what works, and what does not work, in terms of relationships, the client role, monitoring and managing performance;
- how delivery is managed and expectations agreed;
- what they felt good practice should be in the above areas.

It should be recognised that one to one feedback into this review from councils was limited. Therefore, Tpas carried out a wider review of good practice in tenant engagement and utilised recent research to give this project increased validity and a wider base of evidence.

#### Literature Review

A literature review was carried out to supplement and support the findings of the research.



## 4. Summary of the report

ALMOs undertake the majority of tenant engagement activities and all have a focus on tenant engagement themselves, however it tends to be an element of other objectives rather than having a service profile in its own right in many cases.

ALMOs offer a range of activities and approaches to tenant engagement but their effectiveness is not always scrutinised and tenants can be unsure as to its value or impact and who, council or ALMO, is responsible for what.

Complaints remain the key and most frequent contact between tenants and their ALMOs/councils.

Theme	Findings	Recommendations
<b>1. Relationships</b>	Hands-off approach, relying on management agreement	Increase presence of tenancy engagement in management agreements
<b>2. Housing Conditions &amp; Tenant Satisfaction</b>	Many ALMOs top performers for overall satisfaction with landlord	Use benchmarking as a tool to drive performance
<b>3. KPIs for Tenant Engagement</b>	Most ALMOs have no specific KPIs or rely on STAR survey	Develop KPIs, use good practice, consider net promoter score model
<b>4. Tenant Engagement Strategies</b>	Tenant engagement delegated to ALMO with general council oversight of policies and strategies.	Link tenant engagement strategy directly to business/corporate plans. Celebrate and publicise achievements in tenant engagement.
<b>5. Regulation</b>	Council has responsibility for regulatory compliance.	Increase priority of assurance of compliance with consumer standards.
	Should provide genuine opportunities for tenants to engage/have their views heard	Encourage tenant engagement to be present in, and a key aspect of, organisational culture.
	Good governance, data and systems are key to managing compliance and risk	Check tenant engagement applies to all standards. Assess approach using Tenant Involvement & Empowerment Standard Accurate, timely and effective monitoring and escalation mechanisms in place
	Councils and ALMOs don't use self-assessment tools as frequently as RPs	Focus on the "right" outcomes and effective relationships. Develop self-assessment tool for tenant engagement
<b>6. Governance &amp; Decision Making</b>	ALMO Boards are responsible for ensuring their compliance with regulation	Councils to have full oversight of board structures and standards.
<b>7. Empowering Communities</b>	Genuine engagement balances power relationship and ensures landlord works in tenants' best interest.	Councils to measure activities and effectiveness of ALMOs tenant engagement
	Processes for ensuring tenant feedback reaches governance structures varies and range of	ALMOs need to ensure and demonstrate openness/transparency and publicise how feedback is used positively. Changes to



	communication methods are involved	management agreement should be consulted on with tenants.
<b>8. Involving Everyone</b>	Need the right activities at the right time delivered in the right way.	Regularly review engagement approach and fit with tenant base. Monitor effectiveness and value of different activities.
	ALMOs using insight to digitise services and engagement.	Digital services should be designed by tenants for tenants.
	Successful engagement relies on support, mentoring and training.	Councils to ensure that adequate resources are in place for effective engagement to take place and publicise opportunities.
<b>9. Complaints</b>	Usually a two-stage process including referral to designated person.	Consider using independent advocacy and mediation services.
	“Every Voice Counts”: complaints are often the first, ad hoc only, contact tenants have with ALMOs	Operate a comprehensive complaints framework that is developed with tenants.
<b>10. Tenant Scrutiny, Tenancy Audits &amp; Customer Insight</b>	Most ALMOs have tenant led scrutiny/co-regulatory approach.  Tenancy audits can improve engagement and recruit tenants into engagement framework.	Resident led scrutiny to feature at monitoring meetings.  ALMOs should collect information and offer/stimulate involvement with scrutiny and service improvement.
<b>11. Measuring Outcomes and Impact</b>	Impact assessments vary between organisations	ALMOs need to timetable impact assessment and share results with councils.
<b>12. When can tenants go directly to the council</b>	Ranges from any time to planning consultation and different services to whistle-blowing and serious complaints.	Councils need to show a clear route for tenants to engage directly with them and in what circumstances, including when ALMO response is unsatisfactory.
<b>13. Tenants understanding the ALMO</b>	Tenants don’t always understand the different roles and responsibilities of the ALMO and council	Councils should clearly outline their responsibilities and the services undertaken on their behalf by the ALMO; this should be affirmed in ALMOs annual reports with examples of work done.  Councillors should make sense/reality checks of ALMOs tenant engagement activities.

Tenant Engagement needs a high profile with dedicated governance, performance monitoring and scrutiny that involves tenants themselves.

Engagement needs to be properly resourced and its effectiveness regularly reviewed. Division of responsibilities, escalation procedures and how tenant feedback is used and its impact, needs to be clearly and consistently set out.

Tenants should be involved in the design and evaluation of tenant engagement as they should be with other services.



## 5. Key Findings

### 5.1 Relationships

Councils and their ALMOs work closely together and are natural partners for many services beyond the immediate housing management role i.e. community development and regeneration, crime reductions and anti-social behaviour.

However, in relation to tenant engagement, councils tend to have a 'hands off' approach to the strategic and operational aspects of the tenant engagement service delivered by their ALMO, relying on monitoring via their Management Agreements.

In the main, councils gain assurance via regular client meetings and oversight of key performance data supplied to them by their ALMO. Most councils utilise their ALMOs to carry out consultation in relation to their responsibilities as a landlord, i.e. rent increases, changes to tenancy agreements, changes to lettings policy.

- **Recommendation:** Councils should strengthen their requirements in tenant engagement in drawing up or reviewing their management agreements going forward.

### 5.2 Housing Conditions and Tenant Satisfaction

Generally, tenant satisfaction is high where an ALMO undertakes the landlord role, with many performing in the top quartile in relation to overall satisfaction with the landlord.

Some examples of this are shown below:

ALMO	Tenant satisfaction with Landlord	Upper Quartile
Derby Homes	94.4	89.9
Nottingham City Homes	90	89.9
Newark and Sherwood Homes	90	89.9
Berneslai Homes	89	89.9
Six Town Housing	96.5	89.9

ALMO	Satisfaction with views taken into account	Upper Quartile
Derby Homes	83.3	75.3
Nottingham City Homes	78	75.3
Stockport Homes	97.4	75.3
<i>*Data taken from website published data</i>		

- **Recommendation:** Councils to consider benchmarking performance of all ALMOs as a monitoring tool to drive improvement of their own ALMO. <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/housing-statistic>



### 5.3 Key Performance Indicators (KPIs)

There is a mixed approach to the use of KPIs for tenant engagement, with some ALMOs looking to improve their use of KPIs. A significant number of respondents said they have no specific KPIs for tenant engagement, whilst others use the HouseMark's survey of tenants and residents (STAR) survey questions as the basis for, or replacement for, their KPIs.

- Percentage of tenants satisfied with opportunities to be involved, and;
- Percentage of tenants satisfied that their views are listened to and acted upon.

A few organisations had KPIs that included:

- Percentage of engaged tenants levels, including involvement from Black, Asian and minority ethnic communities
- Numbers of tenants undertaking training organised by the ALMO
- Attendance at meetings
- Percentage of new customer unique profiles completed
- Number of tenant engagement interventions carried out
- Number of residents actively involved in developing housing services
- Number of scrutiny reviews completed
- Number of scrutiny review recommendations completed
- Number of actions arising from estate walkabouts
- Number of actions from estate walkabout resolved, and;
- Net Promoter Score – i.e. would you recommend our company to a friend or family

#### Recommendation:

- ➡ ALMOs, with their council, consider establishing a set of their own specific KPIs linked to tenant engagement. Consider using tools like HouseMark and data such as net promoter scores.

#### Good Practice

##### St Leger Homes of Doncaster

Introduced a new KPI that relies on their new customer involvement model to capture improvements and outcomes made as a result of tenant involvement. Links to customer involvement priorities and measuring success against each priority.

### 5.4 Tenant Engagement Strategies

All respondents had a tenant engagement strategy in place. The majority of respondents to the survey stated that responsibility for tenant engagement is delegated to the ALMO, but the council has oversight or approves all ALMO policies and strategies.

A tenant engagement strategy should set out the commitment to, and purpose of, tenant engagement. It should detail how tenants will be engaged and how councils/ALMOs will support tenant involvement in decision making, service and policy development, scrutiny and improvement, and the complaints process.

#### Recommendation:

- ➡ Tenant engagement strategy to link directly to council' corporate/business plan and ALMO's own business/delivery plan. It should set out how the strategy will be resourced, how outcomes are monitored, measured and that these are reported consistently and regularly. Achievements in tenant engagement should be celebrated and publicised.



- ➔ **Recommendation:** Council should ensure the ALMO's tenant engagement strategy is reviewed at least every three years and the action plan reviewed and updated on a yearly basis.

**LGA/Tpas report into Engaging and Empowering Tenants in Council-Owned Housing** provides a clear picture of engagement within council-owned homes and should be used to spark discussion and ideas into what more should and can be done. The report sets Good Practice Principles for engagement and that good practice must be part of a tenant engagement approach.

The key to effective tenant engagement is a commitment throughout the council and ALMO, from Elected Members, Boards and executive teams right to the front line.

## 5.5 Regulation

The Regulator of Social Housing (RSH) regulates registered providers (RPs) of social housing (including councils) to promote a viable, efficient and well-governed social housing sector that is able to deliver homes that meet a range of needs.

The Regulator's role in tenant engagement is clearly linked to the Consumer Standards. Consumer Standards have been set so that tenants, landlords and stakeholders know the outcomes that are expected and to enable tenants to effectively hold their landlords to account. Action may be taken if these standards are breached or where there is a potential for serious detriment to tenants.

There are four **Consumer Standards** two of which have clear links to tenant engagement.

### Tenant Involvement and Empowerment Standard

- Customer service, choice and complaints
- Involvement and empowerment
- Understanding and responding to the diverse needs of tenants

### Neighbourhood and Community Standard

- Neighbourhood management
- Local area co-operation
- Anti-social behaviour

The council, as the landlord of the housing stock (Housing Revenue Account), is ultimately responsible for compliance with the standards prescribed by the Regulator, even where the housing function or service has been delegated to an ALMO.

- ➔ **Recommendation:** There is a need to ensure that a higher priority is given within councils to gaining assurance that their ALMOs are complying with the RSH Consumer Regulatory Standards.

The RSH proposes registered providers should engage with their tenants, listen to tenants and give them the opportunity to make their views heard.

- ➔ **Recommendation:** RPs must see tenant engagement as a key indicator of organisational culture.
- ➔ **Recommendation:** Tenant engagement runs through all the standards, however, a good place to start when assessing an ALMOs performance in relation to tenant engagement is the Tenant Involvement and Empowerment Standard.



Good governance is seen by the RSH as critical in managing risk effectively.

- ➔ **Recommendation:** A RPs governing body and in the case of ALMOs, the council, must ensure that it has effective oversight via timely and accurate reporting, and that it understands what assurance it has that risks are being identified, managed and monitored, with escalation mechanisms where appropriate.

Effective assurance is seen by the RSH as being through relying on good quality data, and maintaining compliance requires effective systems.

- ➔ **Recommendation:** Providers should understand and be able to demonstrate compliance across all aspects of the Consumer Standards, including how they engage with their tenants, how they deal with neighbourhood issues, and how they allocate their homes.

The RSH states that complying with the consumer standards should not solely be driven by the requirement to do so from the Regulator.

- ➔ **Recommendation:** Any registered provider should seek to achieve a well-run business, by focusing on, and delivering, the right outcomes and establishing and maintaining effective relationships with tenants and other stakeholders, as well as managing any potential reputational risk.

Many RPs utilise a self-assessment tool to provide strategic and board oversight in relation to how they perform against the standards. This does not appear to be an approach adopted by councils or ALMOs to date.

- ➔ **Recommendation:** Consider the utilisation of a self-assessment tool to provide strategic and board oversight in relation to performance against RSH consumer tenant engagement standards.

## 5.6 Governance and Decision Making at Board Level

ALMOs are companies run by a Board of Directors, usually made up of independent, council and tenant board members. Tenant board membership ensures tenants are represented at the highest level and whilst they do not speak for all tenants, they can help ensure that the focus on tenant issues is maintained.

The Board is also responsible for ensuring the ALMO meets all regulatory and legal requirements.

- ➔ **Recommendation:** Councils should have oversight over the ALMOs governance arrangements and ensure the board is operating to good governance standards and meeting all the RSH's Consumer Standards.

## 5.7 Empowering Communities

A vital outcome of successful tenant engagement is the transference of power from organisations to tenants and communities, resulting in resident focussed outcomes. ALMOs have from their inception encouraged tenants to take up places in their structures and have provided a framework for tenants to engage, from formal board membership to formal and informal tenant engagement and community based interventions.

Genuine engagement of tenants can help balance the power relationship and ensure that councils and ALMOs work in the best interest of tenants.



- ➔ **Recommendation:** Councils should measure the activities and success of the ALMO in engaging residents in formal structures.

### **National Federation of ALMOs – Every Voice Counts: a spotlight in tenant engagement**

The report focuses on how tenants are involved in setting the Governance Framework, monitoring/scrutinising performance and reporting back to the board, with most ALMOs choosing to have Tenant Board Members to ensure the tenant voice is heard.

ALMOs have robust processes to ensure that the information from tenant engagement is fed into the governance system. These change from ALMO to ALMO depending on tenant feedback and local needs. They also include a range of methods to communicate the outcomes of engagement – the “You Said – We Did” element of the feedback loop.

- ➔ **Recommendation:** ALMOs must ensure openness and transparency is seen as a key cultural characteristic. Feeding back through a range of media methods. Councils must work alongside the ALMO to ensure any documentation links to the council’s website or communications
- ➔ **Recommendation:** ALMOs and councils consider good practice examples as a way of improving openness and transparency.

### **The London Assembly Report on Tenant Engagement**

This report was published in the wake of the Grenfell Tower tragedy. *Hearing Resident Voices in Social Housing* (November 2018) suggested a useful set of principles:

- Co-design services with residents from the outset;
- Co-design the resident engagement structure;
- Show residents how contributions are used to take decisions;
- Commit to transparency: full and open access to information;
- Clear, simple and easy procedure for complaints;
- Buy-in from housing officers: face to face engagement;
- Support and work with independent self-organised and representative tenant groups.

### **Good Practice Examples**

#### **Cheltenham Borough Homes (CBH)**

Disabled Community Forum (DCF) and the Polish Community Forum (PCF) set up to help bring communities together and to empower those in need of extra help. The forums eventually formed their own independent peer groups. E.g. the formation of the Oasis Ability Hub and the Cheltenham Polish Tenants and Residents’ Association (CP TARA), which have become key partners of CBH. Both groups are forging new relationships with local businesses, developing innovative ways of setting up peer support and organising various social activities to form new social networks.

#### **Stockport Homes**

Working together with Starting Point Community Learning Partnership, Stockport Homes is tackling digital and social exclusions in their communities, targeting the hardest to reach by using motivators such as food, health and family ancestry.

The partnership has supported communities to gain external funding. It has developed local “Digital Heroes” and increased local capacity through training Stockport Homes’ staff volunteers to deliver



community and drop-in digital sessions. It has also created a social enterprise, the Windmill Coffee Shop, which employs excluded young people and reinvests profits into local communities.

### 5.8 Involving Everyone

Most ALMOs offer a range of activities to engage and obtain resident feedback to ensure that a wider range of views are captured rather than the same few influencers on behalf of many.

Popular activities tend to be estate/area or locality based with support for tenant and resident groups and estate walkabouts. Some ALMOs have moved to a more ad hoc approach, i.e. inviting tenants to participate in a Task and Finish Approach.

However, traditional engagement structures do not work for everyone and ALMOs are continually developing and investing in a range of initiatives which support wider participation. This includes mechanisms for hard to reach groups such as; youth, the older generation, those who are digitally excluded, BAME communities, LGBTI people and those with disabilities.

The effectiveness of tenant engagement activities must be evaluated regularly to see they are effective and benefit both tenants and the organisation.

- ➡ **Recommendation:** Councils should work alongside the ALMO to ensure it provides, and regularly reviews, a framework for tenant engagement in order to meet the wider tenant base and diverse community profile changes and demands successfully.

Digital platforms can enable greater opportunities for engagement and broaden the reach and sometimes the quality of engagement. How digitalisation is approached depends on the provider's knowledge of their tenants and links closely to customer insight.

- ➡ **Recommendation:** Councils should ensure that their ALMO has a customer-focussed approach to digitalisation and that it is designed by the customer for the customer.

The majority of ALMOs provide training to tenants. ALMOs need to resource and provide high quality support, mentoring and training of tenants to ensure meaningful tenant engagement.

- ➡ **Recommendation:** Councils must ensure ALMOs are providing adequate resources for tenant engagement and that information on training opportunities, financial and officer support is well publicised

**Attitudes to Social Housing Tenants:** A report published by Ministry for Housing Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) in July 2019 shared findings from the British Social Attitudes survey on a number of matters relating to social housing.

Key findings with regards to engagement included:

- Social tenants' engagement with activities in relation to their housing was found to be limited, with most social renters reporting that they had not any interaction over the last 12 months.
- Looking at the ways people have been involved, the survey shows that online engagement has been just as important as meetings.

**Consumer Regulation Review – 2018/19 – Regulator of Social Housing:** The Tenant Involvement and Empowerment Standard sets out expectations of how RPs should:



- Treat their tenants and the importance of demonstrating that they understand the different needs of tenants including those with additional support needs.
- Communicate with and listen to their tenants. This is particularly important where registered providers are proposing a change in landlord for one or more of their tenants or a significant change in their management arrangements.

➡ **Recommendation:** Councils should ensure any changes to the management agreement have been consulted with tenants.

### Good Practice Examples

**Newark and Sherwood Homes** Measures number of actions raised during Estate Walkabouts and the number of actions raised from Estate Walkabouts resolved.

**Shropshire Towns and Rural (STAR) Housing** Utilises two area panels to involve tenants. Panel activities include choosing service scrutiny areas; setting area standards and targets; approving grants for community activities, and monitoring performance of housing services in their area.

**Wolverhampton Homes** Holds regular 'Get Togethers', led by the Chief Executive/Director and one Board Member, are structured but informal meetings. These are publicised widely and are open to all tenants.

**Colchester Borough Homes** Have a team of tenant\leaseholder Quality Assurance Advisors (QAAs), who monitor the Estate Management Strategy alongside the quality of maintenance and cleaning contracts within their blocks/estates and surrounding areas.

### Ryknelde Homes (RH) – Working with Diverse Groups

Was awarded a Housing Innovation Award for Most Innovative Community Engagement.

RH established a Community Improvers Group, which works with 11-19 year olds to develop life skills and work for the benefit of local communities. The group gets involve in a diverse range of opportunities, including:

Community projects, such as clean-ups, garden improvements, cooking programmes, learning how homelessness and having their say about North East Derbyshire District Council can support young people;

- Scrutinising written materials to ensure they are easy to understand, and;
- Mentoring other young people. Community Improvers earn points through the Dreamscheme which they can exchange for rewards and days out.

• **Dacorum Borough Council – Digital Engagement** Dacorum has rolled out digital skills training in sheltered schemes. This was a result of 60% of older people not being active on line. One tenant is now a digital champion and can explain how 'going digital' has improved his access to a number of opportunities he never had before and meeting up with old friends via social media has reduced his sense of isolation.

**Hull City Council – High Rise** Has a Multi-Storey Living Group, the members of which all live in the city's 28 high-rise blocks or the 452 low-rise blocks, has had a profound effect on improving both the services and the quality of life for residents.



**Oxford City Council – High Rise** Commenced a tower block refurbishment project where residents are involved in procurement of contactors and architects and are also involved in the evaluation of contractors and at the interview stage. There is a dedicated resident liaison officer for refurbishment and housing development that sits within the Tenant Engagement Team.

**Housing Leeds – High Rise** Has a high-rise tenant engagement group (116 blocks) that has worked together to create a high-rise strategy and meets regularly to review safety and service performance.

## 5.9 Complaints

The Tenant Involvement and Empowerment Standard states that providers will:

- Provide choices, information and communication that is appropriate to the diverse needs of their tenants in the delivery of all the standards.
- Have an approach to complaints that is clear, simple and accessible that ensures that complaints are resolved promptly, politely and fairly.

Councils and ALMOs usually operate a two-stage process with an option to refer the complaint to a designated person, usually an MP or a Tenant’s Panel.

The Social Housing Green Paper has questioned the effectiveness of the democratic filter, which forces social housing tenants to approach a politician or a Tenants Panel; or wait eight weeks before they can access the Housing Ombudsman service. The paper also suggests that providers consider the need for independent advocacy and mediation services as a positive direction for tenants.

➔ **Recommendation:** Councils and ALMOs consider independent advocacy and mediation services should be offered to tenants within the complaint policy/procedures.

The Housing Ombudsman has recently announced changes to the way it will be dealing with complaints, with implications for both landlords and tenants.

- The introduction of a new “severe maladministration” - fining higher fees for landlords and the halving of complaint resolution times.
- Powers to investigate whether shortcomings were indicative of systemic failings, with any found being reported to the RSH.
- Expectations that landlords maintain complaints procedure in accordance with the Housing Ombudsman’s best practice.
- A new power to prevent complaints from becoming lost when referred back to landlords by requiring landlords to report results to the Ombudsman.

### Good Practice Examples

**Derwent Living** Offers a mediation service provided by both trained tenants and staff in relation to complaint resolution and neighbour disputes.

**Asra Housing Association** Use complaints in service design with the initial aim to ‘humanise’ the complaints system with a whole organisation training programme focusing on:

- A positive response to first time fixing is seen as critical
- Improving the customer experience by only dealing with one person
- Development of scripts so that everyone can deal with queries and questions
- Customers were involved in road testing the diagnostics and journey mapping



- Staff empowered to deal with and resolve complaints there and then.
- Resulting in an improvement of satisfaction with complaints from 64% to 96%.

The key to effective tenant engagement is a commitment throughout the council and ALMO, from Elected Members, Boards and Executive Teams right to the front line. The 'Every Voice Counts' report into tenant engagement focusses on the fact that a complaint is the first, and in some cases the only way, that tenants engage with the ALMO.

- ➔ **Recommendation:** It is essential that ALMOs operate a comprehensive complaints framework, with tenants involved in the development of these frameworks and in the scrutiny of complaints.
- ➔ **Recommendation:** ALMOs and councils consider good practice examples as a way of improving openness and transparency.

**The Consumer Regulation Review** states the importance of resident communication where registered providers are proposing a change in landlord for one or more of their tenants or a significant change in their management arrangements.

- ➔ **Recommendation:** Councils should ensure any changes to the management agreement have been consulted with tenants.

### 5.10 Tenant Scrutiny

Most ALMOs have a resident led scrutiny framework in place that compliments their democratic scrutiny processes and the councils/ALMOs governance. Many providers see this as an essential tool to achieve a co-regulatory approach.

- ➔ **Recommendation:** Councils and ALMOs should see resident led scrutiny as providing information at council/ALMO monitoring meetings, which ensures resident challenge and influence and holding the ALMO to account for its performance.

#### Good Practice Examples

**Homes in Sedgemoor** Held a one-day boot camp facilitated by Tpas to scrutinise the resident newsletter (value for money and readership). The report and the recommendations were included on the Board agenda.

**Swindon Borough Council** Has a panel of five resident members who decide which area of the service to scrutinise, using data provided by managers. A six-stage process of review is used to ensure services provide value for money without compromising quality.

**Croydon Council** Has a scrutiny group which is given complete autonomy on what they can scrutinise.

### 5.11 Tenancy Audits and Customer Insight

Robust tenancy audits are a way of obtaining profile information.

Tenancy audits are also away to improve tenant engagement and actively recruit tenants into the involvement framework.

- ➔ **Recommendation:** ALMOs must collect and use this insight to proactively increase take-up of tenant engagement and improve services.



### Good Practice Examples

**Colchester Borough Homes** Carry out regular tenancy audits funded by the council. The audits identify residents who are in need of support, emergency works, tenancy fraud and empty homes.

**Gedling Borough Council** Audits have strengthened its face to face engagement with residents to help teams develop more customer-centred service plans and get a deeper insight into the needs of local people. The 'Gedling Conversation' is an annual campaign which provides face to face opportunities for questions and solutions.

**Hull City Council** Collect profile information in relation to engaged tenants on a quarterly basis and compare the findings with the overall customer profile. By comparing profile data, Resident Engagement Officers are able to target their work in order to engage with groups that are under-represented.

### 5.12 Measuring Outcomes and Impact of Engagement

Measuring the impact of tenant engagement has been reported as a challenge by councils. The Local Government Association/Tpas report on Engaging and Empowering Tenants, found that many councils felt this is the key to challenging the perception of tenant engagement as a service.

There has been a mixed response in this research in relation to how often impact assessments for tenant engagement are carried out, with 6 respondents saying these are not carried out, 6 respondents saying they are carried out after every tenant engagement activity, and 3 respondents saying they are carried out for new tenant engagement activities or when tenants have been involved in a new policy/strategy/ procedure.

All other respondents said they complete impact assessments for tenant engagement either regularly, every 6 months, annually, every 2 years or every 3 years.

➔ **Recommendation:** Council and ALMO to agree a framework and timescales on what/how/when to carry out tenant engagement assessments and how outcomes are fully shared with their council.

### Good Practice Examples

**Nottingham City Homes (NCH)** Customer Excellence Panel use a self-assessment form to measure whether or not NCH is delivering the service that tenants and leaseholders expect. This is assessed through a combination of performance measures, customer satisfaction data and service managers' self-assessment against the NCH promises. The panel completes assessments of how the company is performing against the 4 Star Promises at the end of each financial year.

**Bassetlaw District Council (BDC)** Carry out an annual impact assessment report, which includes the annual social impact. BDC are clear on their purpose for engagement, which is:

- Improving accountability;
- Improving social capital, and;
- Improving services.

In partnership with tenants and leaseholders they assess impact and value for money with a set of indicators that show high, medium and low impact



### 5.13 When can tenants go direct to the council?

The responses to the question asking under what circumstances can tenants and residents go directly to the council seems to have been interpreted differently by respondents, with some taking it as referring to their complaints process.

The majority of respondents stated that tenants and residents can go directly to the council through the local democratic process. However, six respondents said tenants and residents can go directly to the council at any time, whilst seven respondents said the tenants could go directly to the council regarding community safety, new build schemes, regeneration, whistleblowing, housing appeals and reviews linked to allocations, waste and recycling.

Two respondents said that the council would not engage directly with tenants and residents in matters that had been delegated to the ALMO. The remaining respondents said that they would engage direct with tenants if looking at:

- New developments or significant redevelopment/regeneration
  - Housing strategy and planning
  - Policies and strategies where the council is still the lead e.g. allocations, homelessness, rent setting
  - HRA business plan
  - Rent reviews
  - Options appraisals
  - Bringing the service back in-house
  - Changes to tenancy agreements
  - Fire safety
- ➔ **Recommendation:** Councils should provide a route for their tenants to engage directly in circumstances where the tenant or leaseholder has real concerns that they do not feel are being addressed or heard by the ALMO.
- ➔ **Recommendation:** It is essential that all councils provide their tenants and leaseholders with a direct route for whistleblowing in relation to their ALMO

### 5.14 Tenants understanding of the ALMO

This research found that tenants often struggle to understand the difference between the role of the council as their landlord and their ALMO as the landlords managing agent.

- ➔ **Recommendation:** Councils should provide clear and regular communication with their tenants in relation to their role as landlord and the services carried out by their ALMO on their behalf.
- ➔ **Recommendation:** Councils, if they do not already do so, should provide narrative within the ALMOs annual reports to tenants affirming their support of the work that their ALMO has done/is doing.
- ➔ **Recommendation:** Councils and Elected Members should consider undertaking reality checks of their ALMOs engagement activity and attend key engagement events, major review of policies, development of key corporate objectives, etc. This will also increase the understanding of tenants in their respective roles.



## APPENDIX A

Tpas would like to thank the following organisations for taking the time to complete the online survey, for taking part in telephone interviews and for attending the London Roundtable Event:

Berneslai Homes  
Blackpool Coastal Housing  
Cheltenham Borough Council  
City of Wolverhampton Council  
Colchester Borough Council  
Colchester Borough Homes  
Cornwall Council  
Cornwall Housing  
Derby City Council  
Derby Homes  
Eastbourne BC  
Eastbourne Homes  
Gateshead Council  
Haringey Council  
Homes for Haringey  
Homes for Sedgemoor  
Kirklees Neighbourhood Housing  
Lewisham Homes  
London Borough of Barnet  
London Borough of Lewisham  
London Borough of Sutton  
Manchester City Council  
Newark and Sherwood District Council  
Newark and Sherwood Homes  
Newcastle City Council  
Northampton Partnership Homes  
Poole Housing Partnership and BCP Council  
Shropshire Town and Rural Housing  
Six Town Housing  
South Tyneside Homes  
South Tyneside Council  
St Ledger Homes of Doncaster  
Stockport Metropolitan Borough Council  
Tower Hamlets Homes/London Borough of Tower Hamlets  
Your Homes Newcastle