

Social Housing In Scotland: Tenant Participation and Community Cohesion

December 2006



About the Authority Forum

The Authority Forum is a quarterly focus group event for senior public sector executives involved in improving service delivery and efficiency at the local level. Selected delegates are drawn from progressive local authorities as well as central government and industry analysts, to discuss and debate a current public sector issue in depth and to develop recommendations for progress.

Taking part in the Authority Forum provides the opportunity to discuss opinions and ideas on key issues with peers. Delegates can position their organisation as a thought leader on priority areas at the local level and similarly can raise the profile of the programmes that they and their colleagues have been working hard to achieve.

The discussion and recommendations of the group are documented in the Authority Forum report, written by Dan Jellinek, editor of e-Government Bulletin. In addition, selected journalists were invited to listen and document any findings for their respective publications.

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Executive Summary

The goal of increased tenant participation in housing management is at the heart of fundamental changes now underway in the Scottish social housing sector.

In August 2006 the Scottish Executive produced a 'Planning Advice Note' (PAN) stating that tenants should be fully involved in the preparation of development plans for their area, a move supported by local authorities, the Royal Town Planning Institute, community groups and developers.



Are new kinds of organisation needed that bridge the 'them' and 'us' of tenant and housing organisations, to boost community involvement at a higher level?

But how easy is it to increase tenant participation in housing management? In England, there are only a handful of examples where tenant participation, organised and driven by an ALMO (arm's length management organisation) or housing association, has successfully delivered structured schemes to improve community involvement in local housing decisions.

Successful techniques have included regular communication through neighbourhood feedback panels; more structured participation in housing association or ALMO decisions; and training for tenant inspection schemes.

But there are challenges to overcome. Being on a management panel of any kind is a complex, time-consuming task, and housing associations are multi-million pound organisations operating in a tough environment. Do tenants have the skills or confidence to undertake such a task, and are they always sufficiently open-minded? And why should they even want to?

Housing associations themselves do not have a positive public image among many parts of the community in Scotland, being perceived as a somehow less trustworthy or less democratic alternative to local government control of housing. This is a barrier to housing stock transfer from councils, which have had trouble winning public votes; and also to increased tenant participation in management.

Are new kinds of organisation needed that bridge the 'them' and 'us' of tenant and housing organisations, to boost community involvement at a higher level?

In all these debates and challenges, ICT could have a key part to play. The experience of leading providers such as Civica suggest that there is increasing use of mobile phones, computers and the internet by tenants in all areas, even where basic literacy and economic deprivation is an issue. Modern technology could be a potentially powerful means to boost tenant engagement.

Visiting officers could help tenants access information services, and information from contact centres, one-stop shops, kiosks and the Internet, together with mobile and traditional telephone contact are likely to be increasingly used together to produce a single, holistic view relating to a particular case, discussion topic or initiative. How fast all this will happen is debatable: that it will happen is not.



Key Points:

- Smaller, community-based housing transfers are more successful because they are anchored in community issues to which people can relate. It is important to connect management of social housing to defined communities and people's everyday lives.
- Housing associations and local authorities must work together to improve the image of housing associations across Scotland, trumpet their successes and benefits and combat damaging myths that they are profit-seeking private sector bodies.
- When times are difficult, people are more motivated to join campaigns: one of the challenges in increasing tenant involvement in housing management is to continue to engage their imagination when their situation is improved.
- It is vital that engagement cuts across all parts of society, including minority ethnic groups; people with disabilities; and people of all ages including younger people who hold the key to many social issues in and around housing estates.
- In seeking to broaden their legitimacy and to win hearts and minds, housing associations must engage all people in their local community in key projects, not just tenants.
- Housing associations are multi-million pound concerns, so it may not be appropriate or possible to involve tenants directly in top-level financial, human resources and other strategic issues. Here large sums are at stake, together with the motivation of housing teams. Engagement must take place locally and at the appropriate level of decision-making to involve tenants and community activists.



- Problems with basic literacy form one of the biggest barriers to communication with tenants in many areas. Imagination and creativity are needed to overcome this barrier.
- Housing associations have a critical role to play in community cohesion. They must use different channels and develop different messages to communicate with all their key stakeholders including tenants, the wider community, local authorities, policymakers, pressure groups, banks, and private sector companies.
- Many associations employ large numbers of staff who are also tenants or live in the local community. These people can act as trusted carriers of information into the community, by word of mouth.
- The use of electronic communications must be combined with work to ensure as many people as possible can access and use ICT. Housing bodies should work with educational institutions, libraries and other local partners to ensure ICT training and skills are as widely available as possible.
- The digital divide may be wide now, but it is closing, and housing bodies must act now to improve their use of technology and be ready for increased reach and demand for these channels. Mobile telephone and digital TV services form an essential part of the mix.
- In common with all aspects of the public sector, there is a fundamental need to continue to embed a more customer-centric approach, as opposed to a public service delivery approach to working. This requires better understanding of customers and the specific key customer 'segments' locally, and the subsequent development and promotion of services that meet the needs of the different groups

Discussion report

There have been negative results in a number of recent housing stock transfer votes including major polls in Edinburgh, Renfrewshire, Stirling and Highland.

Then in December 2006, just a few days before the forum's meeting, tenants in Inverclyde voted comprehensively, by 71% to 29% (of a 65% turnout), in favour of transferring to housing association River Clyde Homes.

This provided a positive backdrop for the Forum, but what was it about this vote that achieved the result desired by the council, the Scottish Executive and the housing association movement, compared with the many other recent votes that had gone the other way?

Clearly part of the answer to winning any democratic vote is good communication of key campaign messages. Housing associations in all areas must strive to connect with their local communities, to demonstrate the value of the work they do in terms that everyone can understand, and broadcast the benefits to local communities that a housing transfer could bring in terms of capital investment and new facilities, skills and expertise.

Good communication will also be the key to implementing the new policy agenda of greater tenant involvement with management of social housing. If people do not know what is going on, they will not be motivated to engage, to try to help the process of change and to join the housing revolution planned by the Scottish Executive to eliminate homelessness within a decade.

However, there is clearly more to it than communication.

Stock transfers: small is beautiful?

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Forum chairman Robert McDowall, Director of DTZ, asked members to consider whether the positive transfer vote in Inverclyde was a real turning point for the housing ownership and management debate in Scotland, putting it back on the road towards housing association ownership, or whether it was just a blip in a continuing general move against transfer.

One key issue in the success or otherwise of housing transfer votes may be the size of the proposal deal. Do smaller transfers allow more effective campaigning, closer to their communities? And if so, what lessons can be learned for larger scale transfers?

Ewan Fraser, Chief Executive of Dunedin Canmore Housing Association, said: "There was another positive stock transfer recently, albeit on a small scale: more than 200 households in a regeneration area of Edinburgh voted for transfer, with a big turnout. The result will be a £50 million investment in these homes.

"This positive attitude may not be reflected across the city, or in large scale votes, but it is the third positive stock transfer vote that I have seen in Edinburgh, which has a history of positive votes in small scale transfers."



"Is the positive transfer vote in Inverclyde a real turning point for housing or just a blip in a continuing general move against transfer?"

Robert McDowall

Frank McCabe, Chief Executive of Queens Cross Housing Association, said: “The housing association movement in Glasgow is traditionally community-based, with more tenant involvement. My own association, which covers the Queen’s Cross, Woodside and Westercommon areas of Glasgow, has been involved in five transfers of between 100 and 600 units. Smaller scale transfers allow more door to door work, but the larger scale housing associations in Glasgow and Edinburgh find it more difficult.

“Queen’s Cross was also heavily involved in the major Glasgow votes as well as Inverclyde and Argyle and Bute, since I and some others of our staff were seconded to those places. One of the things we learned is that it is very important to get your messages across at community level.”

Ewan Fraser said: “With smaller transfers, people can see there is going to be a change to something different, and they can see the positive aspects to that. But in Edinburgh the recent stock transfer ballot was simply seen as a transfer between the council wearing one hat to the council wearing a different hat.

“Also, it was seen that some poor parts of the housing system were going to be transferred as well, so it was not seen as making a significant wholesale difference; people couldn’t see the reasons for transfer.”

Frank McCabe said: “The supposed incentive for transfer in Glasgow, writing off a £900 million debt in the housing system, was too big an issue for tenants: in fact, it simply was not an issue for them. The Glasgow stock transfer has done a lot of good, with some £130 million spent, including new kitchens and bathrooms for example. The main thing housing associations can offer tenants is our track record, we can offer a better service – but we need to sell ourselves at the local level.”

Nigel Knight, Social Housing Director at Civica, said: “It is true that at the local level, tenants can identify more with the issues. When you’re talking about large schemes, involving multiple estates, they’re just not of immediate interest. The bigger they become, the more people lose the ability to identify with the issues and how they relate to them.”

Frank McCabe said: “Our tenants, our owner occupiers, do understand what we stand for. And folk pick up on the services we provide, like lunch clubs. But that’s a bit different for prospective tenants, to whom we go and say ‘vote for us’ – it only works at a local level.”



“One of the things we learned is that it is very important to get your messages across at community level.”

Frank McCabe

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Housing associations: in need of a new image?

Recent housing transfer votes have uncovered a resistance in many parts of Scotland against the very principle of transfer away from local councils, which are seen as democratic public bodies. Housing associations, by contrast, are seen by many campaigners as somehow connected to the profit-making private sector, even though they are not private companies. What can housing associations do to improve their image, and correct some of the myths that circulate?

Alan Moat, Chief Executive of Grampian Housing Association, said: “I am concerned that in the past, some local authorities have not done a lot to discourage the view that housing associations are part of the private sector, and might do things like sell homes from over people’s heads. They didn’t actively

promote this view, but they didn't do enough to correct it. And it's going to take a lot of work at community level to put that right."

"We need people to know that what we do is not just about rented housing, it's about home ownership and many other things. We provide houses for sale, medical facilities, and we're part of the community. We're also involved in social and community enterprises.



"Right now social cohesion is a huge topic ... That gives housing associations a unique position to act as a force for good in the local social environment."

Erika O'Brien

Erika O'Brien, Account Manager at Civica, concurred, saying: "Right now social cohesion is a huge topic, and there seems to be a key role for housing associations to embrace and communicate. That gives them a unique position to act as a force for good in the local social environment. Associations deal with housing management of course, but also with environmental and anti-social issues in conjunction with public protection teams, as well as social aspects in conjunction with social services. Staff also provide an essential community relations role, providing a much needed ear for many, especially older, residents."

Ewan Fraser said: "Yes, housing associations should have done more to say 'we are like local authorities, we are there to give a service to the tenants, and we are not shareholder-driven, we can't be bought and sold'.

"Nevertheless, even though we've had a lot of bad press, we shouldn't get dragged into negative arguments. So let's not say 'we're not private', let's say what we are, and say 'we're doing a good job here'. For example, we're offering an access card for wider facilities in Edinburgh such as museums and leisure centres."

Calum Macaulay, Chief Executive of Albyn Housing Society, said: "In the recent transfer vote in Highland there wasn't a perception among tenants of good leadership. It's vital that leaders emerge to point out the achievements of associations."

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Graeme Russell, Tenancy Services Director of Dunedin Canmore Housing Association, said: "Where transfer votes have been successful there has been an identified leader, an individual figurehead, as for example at Argyle and Bute or in Inverclyde.

"Another issue relates to the size of transfer – as we have already said, if you can get to communities, it helps. Large local authorities have sophisticated PR campaigns but they are only geared up to dealing with PR at a city or local authority-wide level, and can't necessarily identify the issues which affect people in their streets and communities. Housing associations can often be seen as the glue that holds the community together. Additional services give it cohesion, which is of great importance right now."

Robert McDowall said: "In the recent stock transfer vote in Renfrewshire, there was about a 50% turnout, and of those that did vote, there was a pretty even split. As a result, a £300 million deal disappeared at a stroke. When this happened I thought, how could anyone vote against something which is about capital investment and tenant involvement? It was a harsh situation for all parties to deal with."

Graeme Russell said: "There is a fear of the unknown at work. When those 50 people were cheering, it was an expression of fear: they simply don't understand what housing associations are about."

Alan Moat said: “There is also a view that there are just two sectors: public and private, and that the private sector equals profit. There is no view of a third sector. So if people see an organisation that is not in the local authority sector, they think it’s in the private sector.”

Ewan Fraser said: “Historically, we have developed as regeneration bodies, in areas in need of help, so that as soon as we build an affordable house, there are people queuing up for it. We haven’t had to market ourselves.

“Now we are different, better, stronger, new organisations. We haven’t had a need to say it, because customers have been queuing up: but now, if we don’t move and evolve and sell ourselves someone will come along and say we need a different type of organisation, and that housing associations don’t work.”

The Third Way: do we need a new type of housing association?

So far the housing debate in Scotland has focused on local government and housing associations. Other possibilities for the management of social housing such as arm’s length management organisations (ALMOs) or completely new kinds of bodies that might accommodate more tenant involvement, are not high on the agenda. But might new types of organisation be the key to moving the debate forward, and to opening up new possibilities in housing and also in community cohesion?

Robert McDowall said: “If people are resisting housing associations, but the government doesn’t want local authorities to retain housing stock, do we need new types of organisation? Is it time to think about setting up a new type of body that might have a fresh image and thus solve some of the deadlock we are seeing at the moment?”

Alan Moat said: “It should not be a priority to create new types of organisation, but there may need to be a rethink of how housing is delivered. With transfers there is a political element: the government has decided they are the way investment will come. But if people believe that the proper way things should be done is through local authorities, government should deliver investment that way as well, not just say investment won’t happen unless it is removed from local authority control. If that’s what people want, the government should work out ways of delivering it.”

Robert McDowall said: “In England they have ALMOs as a way of renting social housing. In Scotland we don’t have any. It’s just that in Scotland ministers say there have been no applications to set up ALMOs.”

Alan Moat said: “ALMOs might go down better than housing associations in some areas, but I don’t think it is as good a solution for other services beyond housing. Social rented housing is not seen as good, it is seen as a declining sector. Housing associations are also about ownership options and the wider agenda. And most people’s aspirations are for private ownership.”



“If people believe that the proper way things should be done is through local authorities, government should deliver investment that way.”

Alan Moat

Nigel Knight said: “If I don’t understand what a housing association is, why would I want a new type of organisation? It doesn’t solve the problem of a lack of communication.”

Ewan Fraser said: “In general, it seems to me that on the West side of Scotland, local authorities are more accepting of housing associations, but on the East side there is a lack of willingness on the part of local authorities to engage with housing associations. Some local authorities say to housing associations: ‘We’re going to have a partnership with you, and here is what you’re going to do’.

“Housing associations date back to 1975; they have been evolving for 30 years, with deep expertise built up. But local authorities have not taken advantage of it. So we don’t need another type of organisation - that would be starting from scratch.”



“Housing associations have been evolving for 30 years. But local authorities have not taken advantage of this.”

Ewan Fraser

The tenant engagement challenge

Increasing tenant involvement in the management of their housing has been placed at the heart of the Scottish Executive’s housing policy agenda. But setting greater involvement as a goal is one matter, achieving it is quite another. What will be the keys to making it work, and what are the problems to overcome?

Pauline Barbour, Director of the Lintel Trust, said: “The problem is that many people have fundamental misconceptions about housing associations and what they are: so as we have said, PR is important. But there is also an opportunity through housing associations for people to get a lot more involved in their own housing experiences. There is scope for tenants to get involved, if only they had a better understanding of what they could do.”

Ewan Fraser said: “One of the problems with trying to engage tenants is that, paradoxically, we feel that the better the service we give, the fewer people get involved. In problem estates, there is campaigning activity and lobby groups are set up. But we have a good track record, and our stock is a lot better maintained than in some local authorities.

“So although we’ve seen campaigners join our steering groups, when they see things do get better, when the grass is cut, and they see the welfare offices opening, they stop their involvement. There is nothing for them to do any more, nothing to shout about. They are simply enjoying their home, accepting our service.”

Alan Moat said: “We’ve set up customer panels, but even that is hard to sustain. We do have members on the management board. But we are frustrated about tenant involvement. We feel there is not as much involvement as there might be. We do try to interact with newsletters, with meetings, with our annual reports, but it doesn’t mean people will respond to them. We are not getting as big a response as we would like. It is worrying.”

Calum Macaulay said: “There is a problem of self-perception: we are actually talking about consumers of our housing product, so if we’re focused on tenants managing what we do, we are missing the point. As with anything they consume, if our product is good quality, people will want to come back for more. So we don’t necessarily have to have tenant involvement at critical higher levels, I would question if that is necessary to provide a good service.”



Nigel Knight pointed to a similar need across the public sector. “In all areas of public service, there is a fundamental need to continue to embed a more customer-centric approach, as opposed to a public service delivery approach to working. This requires better understanding of who an organisation’s customers are, what are the specific key customer ‘segments’ locally, and their different profiles and service needs. Once the needs and wants of customer groupings are better understood, these then need to drive the organisation and activity of the associations to develop and promote services that meet the needs of the different groups.

“At the last Authority Forum on take-up of local services, the message was clear – in understanding what customers want it is imperative to know who your customers are.



“Different strategies can be created to target different groups and match services to them.”

Nigel Knight

Organisations need to continually research who uses the services, what their preferences may be, and where the high volume of transactions is likely to come from. Different strategies can then be created to target different groups and match services to them.”

Pauline Barbour said: “We receive a lot of applications from minority ethnic groups, wanting to get involved in the work of housing associations. Groups like this need to be drawn in, as do groups representing people with disabilities, younger people, all different groups. Housing associations need to actively encourage all such groups to come into their boards. That’s where the future will lie.

“Young people in particular need to be given credit for wanting to get involved and being able to make a contribution. After all, they do live in our houses as well – there should be representation. We don’t give them enough credit – if they had more opportunities to become involved, they would take them, and often drive new ideas and innovations.”

Nigel Knight said: “Feedback from my customers is that a lot of tenant meetings are attended by people 50 years old or over, and it’s rare to see any youngsters. They talk about daily issues that matter to older people, and these often stem from the actions of younger people. So I wonder what associations could do to bring the youngsters in.”

Pauline Barbour said: “There is a general apathy in many parts of society, and housing associations are a small part of people’s lives. Also I think sometimes housing associations tend to be quite parochial in their views; they focus on their own area. We need to work together widely to say ‘look at us, we are financially secure, we are tackling social issues, we are doing things that no-one else is doing. We should be applauded across the country’.”

Governance and big business: the risks of tenant involvement

One key barrier to greater tenant participation in the management of housing associations is the sheer scale and complexity of running large, multi-million pound organisations. Are ordinary tenants ready for, or qualified for, the sorts of financial and legal issues that the task entails? On what level is it right that they should become involved? And can they be relied upon to take an open-minded approach rather than one which is driven by the need to solve their own very specific issues?

Frank McCabe said: “Essentially we’re community regeneration organisations, so there is an issue about getting tenants involved in governance. After all, I don’t participate in Scottish Power, or Network Rail, or lots of service organisations whose services I use, but suddenly we are saying we need people to participate more. I think they do that simply by paying their rent and accepting the services we provide. What’s the point of asking them what they think of their rent rise?”

Alan Moat said: “We thought the answer was to increase the membership of the housing association. We were very successful at that: now we have 500 members. But the problem is the rules now say we need 10% of our members to be present at general meetings, so we’re challenged to achieve a quorum. The meetings are seen as a formal exercise, and there is a lack of interest, but we have to have them. Maybe the answer is not simply to get tenants involved in the board, but to get more people involved in projects from the whole wider community.”

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“We need to work together to say ‘we are tackling social issues’.”

Pauline Barbour

Ewan Fraser said: “We are a major organisation with a turnover of £25-30 million, so the board has to deal with major treasury management issues and make major human resources decisions. Tenants are not interested in the strategic stuff, in running a business to provide a service. We need to get people involved at the right level – in issues that relate to their area, in single key issues.

“Let’s get smarter about this: we can run a well-managed, efficient business, but not lose track of the tenants. We can also engage them, and show them the benefit to communities of getting involved. But governance is another matter – we are big businesses, and if we get it wrong, we are not going to be able to install any more new kitchens and bathrooms.”

Davie King said: “Tenants do not want to get involved with the governance issues. Our research found most people (70%) want to get information about what we do but they do not want to get involved with the governance of a housing association. Only 5% said they might be interested in getting involved in governance.”

"We can get involvement from tenants when they are in an action area. However once their homes have been refurbished or re-built that will diminish, or they may cease to be involved in the housing association altogether."

Annual reports, tenant surveys and the web: new channels of communication

Traditionally, printed documents such as brochures and annual reports have been the main channels of communication between housing associations and their tenants, and paper questionnaires the main way of obtaining tenant feedback. With modern digital channels such as kiosks and the web becoming more widely used, what is the right balance of methods?

Calum Macaulay said: "Annual reports are, in the main, pretty boring collections of pieces of paper, and don't serve a good purpose. One of the things we do is to conduct a rolling process of resident satisfaction surveys. Each year we cover a different third of our customer base, on a rolling basis. For us that is a particularly useful thing to do. It is not cheap, but it is good value for money and allows us to get feedback on the whole range of things we do."

"Initial paper forms are followed up with phone calls to boost response. We haven't got round yet to electronic surveys, for instance via a website, which doesn't work as well as we would like, or texting, which does come up as an idea from time to time, or email."

Nigel Knight said: "In our experience as a provider of consulting, software and services to social housing groups, we are seeing increased use of new communications channels, whether mobile phones, computers and the internet. But the challenge is to understand different communities' needs and ensure that communication with stakeholders is genuinely individual and relevant."

Alan Moat said: "We also ask people how they want to be involved, and find they don't want to go on management boards. Customer panels, yes, but there is a disproportionate amount of effort that goes into being on boards. We also survey them on individual projects. We've started to simplify our annual reports, and design them as a folded card, rather than a big book – they can be quite useful if they talk about the whole range of things you do, not just housing."

"We also publish a quarterly newsletter – you need to make it lively and attractive. With websites, we are certainly getting to the stage where they are more useful than they used to be, and people are responding more to web surveys."

Graeme Russell said: "One of the biggest problems any RSL has is with literacy levels: we have high levels of literacy problems, there is a significant proportion across social housing sectors. Low literacy is a bigger problem for us than people speaking other languages. We are not hitting our market because a lot of tenants don't have the skills to assimilate messages in handbooks or newsletters. Our IT department has put a tool onto our website that can read out the pages to people. We asked tenants what they thought about this and we received no response!"



"We conduct a rolling process of resident satisfaction surveys. It is not cheap, but it is good value for money and allows us to get feedback."

Calum Macaulay

Ewan Fraser said: "We've got to produce documents for all our key partners like tenants, banks and consultants. You need to work out what you're trying to achieve, who you're trying to target, and you need a number of documents and sources of information for each audience you are targeting. Websites are part of it, but you need a broader range."

Graeme Russell said: "What tenants most often benefit from is a signposting exercise – they need to know who to ask or who to approach to get different types of information at different times. Signposting is more relevant than deluging people with tenants' packs. We need to provide them with resources that let them know: 'This is where you go to get this type of information'."

Frank McCabe said: "We manage some 3,500 properties, all of which are within a 10 minute walk of our offices, and we employ some 120 staff from cooks to housing support workers to concierges. Many of our staff live in our houses and within our area, and people link in with these workers more than they link into me. So they get information by word of mouth. We have underestimated that."

Alan Moat said: "We manage a similar number of units, but scattered over a very wide area. Our tenants live in many different communities, all of whom respond to different things, so it is hard to communicate with all our clients at once. There is too much diversity. We are developing ways of using IT to communicate, such as the Web. But the reality is that a lot of our clients do not use or have access to these technologies."

Nigel Knight said: "Isn't one answer to equip the officer on the doorstep with mobile technology, so when the meals on wheels person or the contractor turns up, the tenant can ask them to help access information? Such methods also provide for greater productivity and increased security. Also, the level of use of mobile phones and digital television is much higher than Internet access, and we need to make it easy for people to use the broadest range of local services for maximum benefit and convenience."

Frank McCabe said: "That is something that could be developed, but information on welfare payments for example is specialised, and not everyone coming to the tenants' door will be able to understand it themselves."

Calum Macaulay said: "We consistently receive 1,500-2,000 hits a month on the web. It's not that large compared with commercial organisations of a similar size, but it is encouraging."

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The age of personalisation

Mobile telephones, the internet and other digital media offer new, more open and interactive ways of communicating with tenants. Housing associations have dipped their toes in the water, but have not so far experimented in a major way with the new generations of electronic tools to talk to tenants, including weblogs or 'blogs', or to use internally to communicate with their staff. So what are the possibilities for the next few years, and how fast should associations try to move in this direction?

Graeme Russell said: "Websites are trying to be all things to all people. I even had a call last week from someone in Australia who had looked at our website, asking about car-free development. So it would be good for example to have separate sites targeted at younger and older people."



"Websites are trying to be all things to all people ... So it would be good for example to have separate sites targeted at younger and older people."

Graeme Russell

Justin Hunt, Director of ItsOpen, said: “A previous Authority Forum report on boosting take-up of e-government services discussed personalisation of web services, and this could be one way of using technology to its best effect. In this way you can then customise service delivery and communication around the different customer groups, as discussed earlier.

Erika O'Brien said: “Housing associations need to research their different customer groups' preferred methods of communication. With an increasing UK community of so called 'silver surfers' using the Web, past assumptions about the communication preferences of older people may no longer prove valid. One social networking website aimed at young people, claims to have eight million UK members that spend an average of 145 minutes per day on its site.

“Local authorities and other organisations we work with are already beginning to explore the potential for social media to engage with their online citizens. Whether via mobile telephones or social media, housing associations now and in the future will need to engage with their different audiences via new technologies if they want to get their messages across.”

Pauline Barbour said: “One issue is that the cost of customisation of websites can be high.”

Graeme Russell said: “There was an article this week about a housing association which had to take legal action against a tenant who had put some comments on a blog.”

Justin Hunt said: “They can be moderated. And new technologies even mean you can access them on a mobile phone, so you don't need computer access. If you open up your organisation, and present yourself as open, you can change your image with everyone, including teenagers.”

Ewan Fraser said: “When we merged we decided we would like to let the staff ask questions of the chief executive using our intranet to improve openness. Anyone member of staff could do this, and the questions could be anonymous, though all the questions and answers went onto the intranet for all the staff to see. It was good; a lot of staff felt we were willing to listen, and it was good use of a Web-based tool.”



“If you open up your organisation, and present yourself as open, you can change your image with everyone, including teenagers.”

Justin Hunt

Bridging the digital divide

New digital tools are all very well, but if a high proportion of housing association tenants still do not have access to computers or the internet, is it justified to spend money developing these channels?

Graeme Russell said: “Last week a tenant survey found that just 7% of people have online access, and 8% have digital TV. On the other hand, some 70% have mobile phones.”

Frank McCabe said: “We offer IT classes, to get folks to come into one of our centres and use IT. It is targeted at tenants and local residents as well, with 40 computers over three IT suites. We offer access, so people can get used to it. The local enterprise company and further education college are involved to help with the training.



Ewan Fraser said: “We ran the same sort of thing, through a college. It was a course where people could learn how to build a computer, taking it apart and putting it back together.”

Alan Moat said: “We helped establish learning houses specialising in IT, but we didn’t put a big sign up saying ‘Learn about IT’ in case it put people off. We let people find out about them for themselves, and before we knew it there was a queue of people wanting to learn IT.

“On the other hand, we have to ask: what do we spend tenants’ money on? If only 7% have access, should you pay to put information online? We have a moral dimension that encourages us to pursue some things and not others, and we would have to make a case for the board.”

Calum Macaulay said: “Other channels will become available. In future digital television will be used for email, for example.”

Graeme Russell said: “There is already a housing association south of the border where tenants can report repairs via the television. We use the internet to report repairs, but there is very low take-up.”

Nigel Knight said: “The Internet will undoubtedly play an important part in everybody’s lives, whether through a mobile, TV or other device. In five years’ time there could be 60, 70, 80% access. But to me, digital TV is the key. People are still not as comfortable with new technology as they are with the telly. But how do you extend IT use in the community? In England, if the Housing Corporation has its way, there will eventually only be a small number of very large housing associations, but you have to train in local ways.”

Ewan Fraser said: “We have a responsibility to look to the future. That 7% who currently have access to IT might become 50% by the time we get our acts together. Two years down the line the numbers could be very different. They’re not going to get any lower.”

And when people are encouraged to use services, their experience must be good or they will not return. This means that online services must be fully integrated with all other service channels, working smoothly alongside them, and delivering a consistent experience whether on the telephone, in person, or via the television. This also means that the back office processes that sit behind the scenes must be effectively automated.

Conclusion

Increasing tenant participation in housing management is a complex matter, especially in Scotland, where housing associations do not enjoy a universally popular public image. There are underlying misunderstandings of the role of housing associations which need to be tackled.

Housing associations are multi-million pound concerns, so it might not be possible or appropriate to involve tenants directly in all important strategic decisions. Instead, engagement has to take place locally at the appropriate level of decision-making.

ICT has a key role to play in promoting effective tenant participation and improving the public image of housing associations in Scotland. While the digital divide might be wide, it is closing, and the web, kiosks, interactive TV, blogs and mobile phones provide housing associations with a broad range of channels which they could be using to engage more effectively and personally with their tenants. Given the fact that housing associations do play a significant and positive part in local communities, the sooner they start spreading the good news more effectively the more quickly they will reap the benefits when it comes to politically-sensitive stock transfer votes.

But as with all such local issues, associations will need to better understand their communities and their customers in order to develop and deliver well-received and well-used services. Whilst technology has a significant role to play in enabling re-engineering of processes to deliver improved services, ultimately these challenges are about people. As is so often the case, the hard part is cultural; it will mean adopting a customer service ethos throughout, as well as ensuring that all parts of the organisation communicate effectively and present an integrated whole that is supported by the various systems used behind the scenes.

However, modern IT systems are adopting a far more customer-oriented approach, by focusing on an organisation's interaction with its tenants and the wider community by whatever medium is most appropriate. The availability of mobile working to capture questionnaires and survey information in customers' homes or meeting points such as community centres can facilitate the canvassing of opinion and remove logistical obstacles to inclusion and participation. In this mobile and wireless age, isn't the answer for organisations to make more effective use of modern technology available?

Given the fact that housing associations do play a significant and positive part in local communities, the sooner they start spreading the good news more effectively they will reap the benefits.



Attendees:

Chairperson:



Robert McDowall,
Director,
DTZ

Participants:



Pauline Barbour,
Director,
Lintel Trust



Alan Moat,
Chief Executive,
Grampian Housing Association



Ewan Fraser,
Chief Executive,
Dunedin Canmore Housing
Association



Erika O'Brien,
Account Manager,
Civica (formerly Comino)



Nigel Knight,
Director, Civica
(formerly Comino)



Graeme Russell,
Tenancy Services Director,
Dunedin Canmore Housing
Association



Calum Macaulay,
Chief Executive,
Albyn Housing Society



Justin Hunt,
Director,
ItsOpen



Davie Martin,
Director of Operations,
Queens Cross Housing
Association



Dan Jellinek,
Editor,
E-Government Bulletin



Frank McCabe,
Chief Executive,
Queens Cross Housing
Association

About Civica

The Civica group is a leader in consulting, software and managed services for the public sector. Supplying many organisations in the UK, Australia and the USA, including 89% of the UK's local authorities, the company has a 20- year history of providing software and services to local government, criminal justice, healthcare and education organisations.

From creating and delivering performance plans to implementing effective IT systems that streamline complex tasks and work processes, Civica blends outcome-based advice, planning and service delivery with a range of systems and services to ease the process of change and to help achieve modern and efficient services.

Efficiency is a priority area for Civica, in activities ranging from a consortium project to establish a performance management framework for ten Scottish councils to helping Australian Local Government Innovation Award winner the City of Whittlesea to achieve transaction savings as high as 79% through e-services.

Consulting

Civica combines practitioner and systems consulting. Led by experienced local government practitioners, its "Authority Solutions" range from corporate support to infrastructure deployment, and focus on:

- Performance management
- Funding and procurement support
- Resource support and optimisation
- Process automation and financial efficiency
- IT strategy and efficiency, including e-government and mobile working

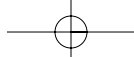
Software

Civica provides a comprehensive suite of local government software. Business areas include finance and income management, revenues and benefits, public protection, parking and traffic management, housing, community safety and legal services, together with practical e-services such as e-billing and e-procurement. The company has developed an integrated enterprise model, providing a platform for the future with an enhanced ability to integrate front office and mobile systems with core systems and back end databases.

Managed Services

Civica offers a proven suite of managed services that can be provided as standalone components or under a full and seamless service. The company takes responsibility for systems and infrastructure on behalf of customers, managing software systems along with equipment such as handheld units for optimum performance and convenience. In addition, and combined where appropriate with Civica's consulting services, the company manages and operates supporting processes ranging from bulk printing and correspondence to business service management.

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