



Championing  
better homes and  
communities

## Tenant Voice

How ALMOs listen to tenants and  
deliver good customer services



The NFA would like to thank ALMO staff and tenants who contributed to this publication. Further information about the ALMO sector can be found on the NFA website.

**Author:** Lisa Birchall, NFA Policy and Research Officer  
**Editor:** Chloe Fletcher, NFA Policy Director  
**Designer:** AnchorPrint Group Ltd - [www.anchorprint.co.uk](http://www.anchorprint.co.uk)  
**Cover Photo:** Lewisham Homes  
**Published By:** NFA – National Federation of ALMOs  
4 Riley Court, Milburn Hill Road, Coventry, CW4 7HP  
[@nfa\\_almos](mailto:nfa_almos)  
**Email:** [info@almos.org.uk](mailto:info@almos.org.uk)  
**Website:** [www.almos.org.uk](http://www.almos.org.uk)  
**Telephone:** 024 7527 1868

Whilst all reasonable care and attention has been taken in compiling this publication, the authors, publishers and editorial team regret that they cannot assume responsibility for any error or omission that it contains.

# Foreword

## Sarita-Marie Rehman-Wall

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Successful tenant engagement transfers absolute power from landlords and shares it with tenants and communities.

Why does this matter? At its simplest, it matters because both sides reap the rewards. Landlords who share decision-making with residents deliver the services residents really want and need; residents get to shape their communities and feel that all-important sense of ownership that feeds into better outcomes for everyone.

Certainly, social housing tenants are rarely in a position to take their 'custom' elsewhere if they are unhappy with the service they receive. However, I hope that we have all finally learned that this is no justification for not giving tenants the rights and respect automatically offered to customers in every other business sector.

This is why ALMOs have for more than two decades encouraged tenants to take up positions on boards, scrutiny panels and tenants' associations. The genuine involvement of tenants rebalances the power relationship and puts the customer first, not the business. The focus shifts to building the social capital of those communities, empowering tenants to improve their life chances and hold their landlord to account.

I am myself a social housing tenant who took the opportunity offered by my ALMO landlord to get involved and make a difference. It has been a transformational experience and one I encourage all my fellow tenants to try for themselves. The ALMO advantage puts us among the lucky few who are invited by our landlords to enter into partnership with them. This excellent report shows not only how it's done, but also the many, many benefits the collaboration brings.

### **Sarita-Marie Rehman-Wall**

Chair of the NFA and

Vice-Chair of Nottingham City Homes

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# Introduction

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The Social Housing White Paper was published in November 2020. Its aim was to drive a culture change in the social housing sector and make sure that tenants were listened to and respected by their landlords, as all customers in any sector deserve to be.

This report examines what NFA members have done in the 18 months since then to review their systems, processes and approach and ask themselves whether they are achieving these goals.

The first arms-length council housing management organisations – often referred to as ALMOs – were set up 20 years ago. Their core purpose was to separate the operational side of housing management from strategic local authority functions. They placed the focus on good practice in both management and maintenance of stock, paying attention to whole communities, and putting the tenant voice front and centre.

Two decades on, ALMOs are still valued partners for their parent local authorities. The model has been proven to work and will be even more relevant in the new regulatory world because it comes with an in-built focus on culture, tenant voice, and delivery of quality services. Events have refocused attention on the fundamentals of what it means to be a good social housing landlord. Briefly, those fundamentals are reliable service delivery, listening and acting when tenants complain or comment, and learning when things go wrong. The impact on tenants' lives when any of these do not happen can be devastating, as has been shown by emerging findings from the Grenfell Tower Public Inquiry, learnings from the Housing Ombudsman casebook, reviews from the Regulator of Social Housing and recent media reports on poor housing management.

The central ingredient is the right organisational culture; this is what determines the nature of the relationship between landlord and tenant. While tenants are customers, the nature of their 'purchase' means they do not usually have the power to take their custom elsewhere if they are unhappy with the quality of what they get. This means that without a robust customer-first culture, it would be easy for landlords and managing agents to cut tenants out of the picture and focus only on the business. Landlords must remember that their business is to provide not just property, but homes. With many of their customers, that relationship lasts a lifetime.

This relationship must be built on respect for tenants and their homes. It should be informed at every level by tenant voices that are heard and acted on. Tenant satisfaction must be measured, and it must drive improvement. Contacting a landlord or managing agent must be made as easy as possible.

**In short, we conclude that to respond to the spirit of the Social Housing White Paper and the regulatory changes it prompts, social housing landlords should - first and foremost - look to their customer service function.**

Including residents in governance is an integral part of the ALMO model and NFA members already have a resource of actively involved tenants to draw on. They sit on boards, committees, scrutiny panels, area panels and other forums. The NFA's own tenant panel has fed into this report, commenting on what they believe makes for good tenant involvement and scrutiny. The messages that run through their feedback are not new or surprising, but they underline and confirm the fundamentals of getting tenant involvement right.

This briefing highlights good practice: it also stresses that success in the new regulatory environment will depend on continuous review and improvement. Learning is the key to this, both from our own mistakes and from the experiences of others in the sector.

This is a second examination of how NFA members listen to tenants and act on what they say. In 2018, [Every Voice Counts](https://www.almos.org.uk/publications/almo-best-practice/every-voice-counts-nfa-best-practice-series/)<sup>1</sup> explored the sector's tenant engagement mechanisms and frameworks. Its insights are still relevant, but this publication takes that work onwards by reflecting on the importance of setting the right organisational culture and developing effective customer service functions.

This publication uses examples from the ALMO sector, but it is as relevant for stock-owning local authorities and housing associations.

This publication is divided into three parts:

1. Culture and the ALMO model
2. Customer service
3. Tenant engagement

<sup>1</sup> Every Voice Counts, <https://www.almos.org.uk/publications/almo-best-practice/every-voice-counts-nfa-best-practice-series/>





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# One: Culture and the ALMO model



*The culture of the organisation is set from the top and is shaped by an imperative to view everything through the eyes of the customer. Is our policy and approach reasonable? Is our communication sending the right message? Do we have the right tone? Is our culture respectful and honest? Are we focused on our core purpose? Are we recruiting people with the right qualities?*



*When you talk about culture, it is in your DNA. As Managing Director, I would be confident that wherever you went, whoever you spoke to, you would meet staff who represent the business.*

## Overview

**This chapter draws on interviews with ALMO Chief Officers and senior managers. They were asked how they create and maintain a culture that delivers good quality services and homes for tenants. Case studies illustrate methods and approaches.**

Culture is at the core of whether a social housing landlord delivers good quality services to tenants<sup>2</sup>. It underpins everything an organisation does. It defines the relationship between the landlord or managing agent and the tenant. Good organisational culture feeds into excellent customer services and a respectful attitude towards tenants, with tenants at the heart of what the organisation does. A good culture does not stop things going wrong, but it does minimise the risk of it doing so.

Changing the culture of council housing departments to improve the services that council tenants received was the aim of the first ALMOs. This was why tenant engagement on boards and in other governance structures was mandatory, and their performance, standards and continuous improvement was regulated by a proactive Audit Commission. Although the Housing Inspectorate was disbanded in 2011, ALMOs maintain a focus on transparency through regular monitoring and evaluation.

This section covers:

- Responsibilities of senior managers
- Building the right staff team
- The role of the Board
- Identifying blind spots and reducing their impact
- Removing barriers to communication
- Tackling stigma

<sup>2</sup> There are numerous definitions of 'organisational culture' and a whole literature around it. Rather than go into the detail, we're talking broadly about the shared values, expectations and behaviour of staff that govern how an organisation actually does things.

## Responsibilities of senior managers

Senior leaders in every part of the organisation must model the behaviours they want to see, said our interviewees. This includes a clear and consistent focus on delivering good services for tenants. Culture starts and is maintained from the top. A second key characteristic, interviewees said, is the importance of modelling a culture where mistakes are not penalised and instead are learned from.

Consistency is important (not letting standards slip). Senior executives should challenge their managers and staff rather than believing everything they're told. They should have an ear to the ground and speak to tenants themselves.

Interviewees spoke about the importance of reviewing information through a tenant/customer lens and, before making a decision, asking the question: 'What does this actually mean for tenants?' When reviewing complaints, for instance, senior managers should consider not just whether policy has been followed, but also whether that policy is fair, fit for purpose and reasonable from a tenant's perspective. And, indeed, this reflects the Housing Ombudsman's recent change in approach.

Interviewees also spoke of the need to consider other areas of the business, such as responding to damp and mould concerns and anti-social behaviour, through the eyes of the tenant, as these are often areas where an organisation's policy is not in line with tenants' expectations.

“What does it mean if, for example, our performance management information is showing an increase in 'void re-let times'? It means that we have not been able to give families a new home as fast as we should have. We need to challenge the language we use, instead of focusing on void rent loss, we need to talk about 'families without a home'.”

“We reviewed our ASB strategy by consulting with customers who have complained and weren't happy with how we managed their complaint and the outcome. As a result, the new ASB strategy will have a greater focus on victims.”

“We've developed a new policy towards damp and condensation which is much more in line with what tenants want. It is proactive and sorts problems before they get worse, and we proactively re-visit people who have had problems with damp & condensation.”

Respect for tenants and an honest approach includes not raising people's expectations when you can't deliver – a message echoed by the involved tenants we talked with.

Effective communication is the cornerstone of good culture, our interviewees said. Whether written or verbal, all communication needs to reflect a tenant-centred culture; for example, talking not about a 'property' but about a 'home'.

An organisation's leader should, of course, be approachable and accessible to tenants and staff; however, if culture and systems are working properly, tenants are unlikely to feel they have to circumnavigate them to contact the chief officer. When tenants increasingly contact senior managers that probably suggests something amiss with systems and culture.



## Building the right staff team

Well-trained and well-supported staff with the right attitude deliver good customer services. This begins with recruiting staff who have strong interpersonal skills, passion for their work, empathy and a desire to help people. Technical skills and business knowledge can largely be taught. Staff need to have ownership of their work and be resourceful and responsible. Housing is a people-focused profession and current work on professionalisation in the sector should recognise that.



*"As Chief Executive, I attend every staff induction event and talk about the organisational values and focus on the customer. I consider it so important to give this message from day one that I've probably only missed one induction in the last 16 years."*



*"We prioritise attitude in our recruitment. Every staff member has such a 'can do' attitude and wants to do the right thing and make a change."*

A thorough programme of training and development should be on offer for staff; it should be tailored to the work of each staff group; it should give staff the resources they need to respond effectively and efficiently to customers' needs; and staff should know what to do if situations become complicated or problematic. Staff should feel empowered to solve problems as far as they can rather than refer them on to other levels or departments.

Interviewees told us that they ensure high quality of service from contractors by making it clear that their organisation has exactly the same expectations of them as it does of its in-house staff. Careful procurement and contractor management is underpinned by a strong relationship between housing organisation and contractor; and a contractor's staff must have the same qualities, training and approach to residents as the ALMO.

Staff are more than service providers; they are also a resource that will help develop better ways of working and so directly improve services to tenants. Most tenants' only direct contact with the organisation is through frontline teams like caretakers, repairs staff and call centre staff. Their feedback can improve how things are done; interviewees stressed that housing organisations need to find ways to listen to these members of staff.



*"Frontline staff are a major untapped resource. Working with them, we have identified better ways of doing things, and ultimately that will lead to higher satisfaction from tenants."*

Finally, a commitment to involving and listening to tenants should run through the whole organisation and not be left only to those with tenant engagement in their job title. High-level commitment from executive teams and boards should show all staff that consulting tenants is both necessary and valuable when new services or improvements are planned. Staff should also record how feedback was used and pass that information on to tenants.

## Case study

### Stockport Homes

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Stockport Homes customer engagement team has led a programme of work to ensure that the customer voice is visible and shapes services across the organisation. This includes:

- Development of a customer engagement business partner model. Six business partners work with three teams each in the ALMO; they give specialist support to these teams, and in turn, the teams put this knowledge into practice when they consult with customers. The aim is to make sure that customer engagement is ingrained into the approach of every member of staff.
- Business partners meet their teams regularly through the year; they reflect on the previous quarter's work and consider how they have used and responded to customer feedback, and then plan the coming quarter. The ALMO has invested in the Customer Engagement team so that they feel confident and can constructively challenge senior managers.
- All board papers come with a covering sheet that records how customer consultation has shaped the contents; senior managers have a responsibility to make sure that customer consultation happens in their departments prior to decision making.
- The Senior Leadership Team (SLT) scrutinise a range of detailed reports on key customer feedback issues regularly. These include complaints, tenant surveys and data from tenant interviews.
- The ALMO has identified all opportunities that they can use to strengthen the customer voice, modernising ways for customers to be involved and diversifying the pool of voices they hear from. The customer engagement team is also driving a focus on making sure teams make better use of the data they already have, which forms part of the conversations business partners have with teams as they are shaping their feedback approaches.
- Key features of the model which have been integral to making it work include the strategic buy in, the team's setting high expectations and having persistence and assertiveness with other services, ensuring that the customer voice is part of all work, trying new things and not being afraid to adapt if they are not working, and publicising the work of the community engagement team so the whole organisation understands they are there to help.



## The role of the board

A good board sets the culture of listening to the customer voice, and should be held accountable for the quality of services and how customers' views shape the services. ALMO boards are reviewing the way they work, the information they receive, their scrutiny function and how they hear the voices of tenants to ensure they meet the requirements of the Social Housing White Paper.

## Case study

### Your Homes Newcastle

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As part of their review into the Social Housing White Paper, Your Homes Newcastle (YHN) has worked with board members and customers to develop a new Board Engagement Plan which has an overarching purpose to make sure that the customer voice is heard from the top and that the board uses that voice to hold the ALMO to account.

The plan is divided into six themes. Each of these include specific activity undertaken by board members:

- **INFORM:** Providing balanced and objective information to the board, and making sure that customers know about the work of the board. This will drive activity such as social media videos, blogs following board meetings, "You said, we did" feedback, and 'Meet the Board' events across the city and virtually.
- **CONSULT:** Ensuring that customers can give feedback and that the board can listen to customers directly. Activities for this include 'back to the floor' meetings for board members in service areas closest to customers (e.g. the contact centre, repairs); and board members attending ward surgeries with councillors.
- **INVOLVE:** Working with customers to ensure their ideas are included, with the goal that the board hears customer experiences to influence their decisions. Actions include the development of Customer Moment videos which are shown in each board meeting and record the experiences of one customer in different service areas; board members attending focus groups on specific topics, talking directly to customers; and customer stories included in board reports;
- **EMPOWER:** Ensuring final decisions are in the hands of customers, with board's role to facilitate decision making for customers. YHN has a Customer Service committee which is a sub-committee of the board, made up of customers, which has a direct link to the board, and leads on ensuring the customer voice is heard at board level.

## Identifying blind spots and reducing their impact

A theme that runs through responses to the Grenfell Tower fire and the Social Housing White Paper is how organisations can find their blind spots and deal with them: both the 'known unknowns' – for example, the more marginalised groups that you know you have, but don't hear from; and the 'unknown unknowns' – the problems you may not be aware of until it is too late.

Our respondents were clear that with the right culture and systems firmly in place, a robust set of checks and balances will minimise the risk of gaps in their knowledge. The right culture also makes it possible for staff to reject concealment and use mistakes for learning.

Among the checks and balances used by ALMOs are:

- effective monitoring of MP and councillor queries and media inquiries to identify trends;
- careful tracking and analysis of complaints;
- analysing all sources of feedback, including survey responses, complaints and compliments, tenant scrutiny, and service centre contacts;
- continuous monitoring of management information and key performance information;
- internal audit to look at service standards and performance;
- the use of external accreditations to continually assess customer service.

A number of ALMOs already have, or have reintroduced visits or calls to tenants with whom there has been no contact of any kind for a prolonged period. Some ALMOs have 'eyes wide open' campaigns that train staff to report unusual or concerning things they see as they visit communities and people's homes. Again, this highlights the importance of recruiting empathic and observant staff who care about people.

## Damp and mould

Recent media coverage of homes with persistent damp and mould problems has suggested that this can be a blind spot for the housing sector. There is no doubting the terrible impact poor management of damp and mould can have on people's lives and health. The Housing Ombudsman has written a [Spotlight report](#)<sup>3</sup>, *It's not lifestyle*, based on its casebook.

The issue of how damp and mould is managed brings into play the broader and interlinked issues of culture, quality of services and complaint management, especially when dealing with housing stock which was poorly designed and has complex issues, and when such problems are exacerbated by wider issues of funding, housing availability and over-crowding, particularly in London.

The ALMO sector's learning here highlights the need for a good culture in repairs services that extends from the call centre taking the initial complaint through to the repairs staff and surveyors who visit the home. Their attitudes and responses will determine whether or not the customer has a good outcome.

NFA members highlight the need to make sure all staff are well-trained so that responses are based on an empathic understanding of the decisions some residents may have to make daily – drying washing inside because there is no other safe space or affordable way to do it; a home left unheated for financial reasons; more people allowed to live in the house than the space can comfortably accommodate because someone is desperate for a place to stay. The NFA has summarised detailed good practice in this area in [Damp and mould prevention: An NFA Briefing](#)<sup>4</sup>.

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.housing-ombudsman.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Spotlight-report-Damp-and-mould-final.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> NFA 2021, <https://www.almos.org.uk/policy/housing-health/damp-and-mould-prevention/>



## Removing barriers to communication

Some groups are less likely to be heard, and housing organisations should actively work to reduce barriers for those groups. If the organisation is not working in isolation, and is working with all the community, voluntary and public sector organisations that touch residents' lives, effective communication becomes much easier. ALMOs have the advantage of working in a geographically defined area and are well placed to do this successfully. They have boards and staff teams that should be representative of the communities where they work. These built-in benefits of the model are enhanced when engagement methods are diverse, broad and tailored to the different groups that use the ALMO's services.

## Case study

### Tower Hamlets Homes

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To maximise engagement, Tower Hamlets Homes (THH) works with community partners because it recognises that these groups may have better traction and wider networks. Examples include:

- As part of business plan consultations in 2020, THH worked with a local lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) group, a disability group and a Somali community group; the feedback from this approach was broadly consistent with the borough's tenure makeup.
- THH knows that older BAME residents are more likely to be involved in community food garden initiatives than in panels and forums, so it actively looks to engage with them in those spaces.
- To reach other cohorts, engagement teams go out to GP surgeries and schools to talk directly to residents.
- Very light-touch application processes for community forum memberships make it as easy as possible for people to get involved.
- For those who may be curious but unsure about what involvement means, resident meetings are open to anyone who wants simply to watch and listen. This has encouraged more people to volunteer and in turn helped to rebalance the tenure and ethnicity balance on the scrutiny panel to make it considerably more representative of residents.
- Two spaces on the scrutiny panel are set aside for private renters on Tower Hamlet Homes-managed estates, to acknowledge that they are also part of the fabric of these communities.

## Case study

### Lewisham Homes

Lewisham Homes' new customer engagement framework is focused on embedding learning from Tpas, HQN and Consumer Standards. The approach uses a range of formal and informal methods, both online and face-to-face, and prioritises building community partnerships to reach as many people as possible.

- During the pandemic, Lewisham Homes ran vaccination hubs. One result of this engagement was a realisation that the community had whole households that did not speak English well and were sometimes reliant on just one family member to interpret for them. As a result, English for Speakers of Other Languages classes are now run through the Lewisham Homes Learning Academy for residents. These classes also give Lewisham Homes staff an opportunity to develop relationships with these residents rather than just expecting them to 'engage' out of the blue.
- The Albany Theatre in Deptford runs a Youth Engagement Programme supported by Lewisham Homes which helps foster relationships between young people and the ALMO. The aim is to build trust so that staff can talk to younger members of the community about other issues. For example, one young person who has set up his own record label is now discussing building safety with Lewisham Homes.
- Proactively, staff contact people who have not asked for a repair for quite some time to make sure they and their homes are okay. Learning from pandemic wellbeing calls revealed that some customers, often older people, had not asked for help because they 'didn't want to make a fuss'. Staff hope to capture and deal with a range of property repair problems that, for whatever reason, have not been reported.
- Through Enhance UK, staff are receiving disability training. This is the first stage of building fresh modes of communication with residents that are as accessible as possible; by, for example, running new plans and projects past residents who can offer the insight of lived experience.
- A pilot scheme offered customers the option of making a phone call to complete a printed survey; staff read the questions and wrote down customers' answers. This option was taken up by a higher-than-expected number of residents, showing the importance of offering a range of feedback options.

## Tackling stigma

Recent research has again highlighted the issue of stigma within the social housing sector,<sup>5</sup> finding that negative views of social housing and its residents are perpetuated by the media, society and politicians. Unfortunately, those negative attitudes also sometimes come from a landlord's staff. Stigma was, of course, a core issue for the Social Housing Green Paper and, to a lesser extent, the subsequent White Paper. In evidence to the Grenfell Inquiry and in recent media reports on damp and mould, stigma has been cited as a reason why tenants' views and knowledge have not been respected and acted on. Stigma can be the underlying cause of poor service from parts of the sector, particularly in cases of disrepair. DLUHC's work on professionalisation of the social housing sector has been prompted partly by this problem<sup>6</sup>.

<sup>5</sup> See for example <https://www.durham.ac.uk/business/impact/society/exposing-the-stigma-around-social-housing>. It's not okay – a guide to tackling stigma in social housing, CIH: <https://www.cih.org/publications/its-not-okay-a-guide-to-tackling-stigma-in-social-housing>

<sup>6</sup> DLUHC: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/government-to-drive-up-standards-in-social-housing>

Stigma is an important topic for the NFA Tenant Advisory Panel. After considering the research cited above, they were keen to make sure landlords tackled any stigma in their organisations and that the ALMO sector worked to challenge it at society level, within communities, and with politicians and the media.

One of the main conclusions of this report is that the right culture, the right staff, the right attitudes and the right systems leave no place for the overt stigmatising of social housing tenants. When all this is in place, individual staff or contractors are not able to stigmatise tenants without being challenged; incidences of disrespect and poor service are so unacceptable to the prevailing culture that they become rare and highly visible. The same goes for other forms of discrimination.

However, unconscious bias can shape how individual staff deliver services as can the policies and practices of the organisation; for instance, assuming that social housing tenants will be available during the day for appointments. Our interviewees said unconscious bias training and specific work on de-stigmatising policies, procedures and practices are core to their staff training programmes and they also use tenant feedback to monitor services. But they stressed that demanding a respectful attitude towards tenants and communities at all times from staff was fundamental. Tenants should genuinely be at the heart of the organisation.

## Case study

### Northampton Partnership Homes

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Northampton Partnership Homes (NPH) was established in 2015 with a remit to improve the housing service; this required a change and improvement in the culture of the housing management functions transferred from the local authority, including moving away from a cycle of business restructuring, increasing the morale of the staff team and establishing a more collaborative, positive culture.

Among the benefits has been an ability to make decisions quickly, develop new ways of working, and learn from what hasn't worked. NPH's considerable investment in organisational development includes:

**Strong leadership and an 'open-door' approach among senior managers, led by the Chief Executive.** Directorates are led by specialists, and senior managers are expected to be role models, exhibiting the behaviours and values expected of all staff. All managers receive training and coaches are available to support them. This commitment to training and development is led from the top; the board has maintained the training budget year-on-year despite funding pressures.

**Employee satisfaction monitoring.** Satisfaction is regularly measured, and action plans developed from feedback. Staff are involved in staff conferences, employee forums and working groups and their ideas drive the development of the organisation.



**Investment in training and development.** Significant investment in apprenticeships and graduates makes sure the organisation brings in new ideas and develops new talent for the future. Apprentices have a clear qualification and career pathway, for example in trades from apprentice to 'improver' to single trade and to multi-trade roles.

**Staff are recruited for attitude rather than skills and knowledge.** They need to have the right attitude to be able to put themselves in the customer's shoes, respect customers and have empathy. These values are reflected in the organisation's staff competencies.

**The whole employee pathway aims for consistency in the way that staff are treated.** This approach recognises that the happier staff are, the better service customers are given. For example, both before and during COVID-19 all employees have had access to a psychotherapist who is contracted to provide one to one therapy and mental health support.

**A comprehensive menu of customer engagement informs all staff interaction with customers.** It is designed to make sure that the organisation listens and responds to customers and learns from each interaction.

This investment has seen excellent results. In the five years to 2022, employee satisfaction has grown, and sickness has more than halved; as a result, staff are happier and customer satisfaction has improved.



© Northampton Partnership Homes

## Case study

### Cheltenham Borough Homes

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At its heart, Cheltenham Borough Homes (CBHomes) has a tradition of putting people first, treating them well, and making a positive difference to their lives, by providing safe and secure homes, supporting strong and vibrant communities, and inspiring people to go beyond what is expected. Colleagues are fully engaged with the business and are passionate about making a positive difference to the lives of people living in Cheltenham; ensuring they have more than just a property to live in, they have a home, and the skills to maintain that and be part of the community. *How* the organisation does things is just as important as *what* it does.

CBHomes has been working on a full programme of organisational development over the last six years that is helping colleagues flourish so they can deliver excellent services to customers.

- CBHomes set up a **colleague group**, *We are CBH*, in 2016. Its role is to offer the colleague perspective on any changes the organisation wants to make, and in a number of cases to propose and embed new ideas. An early outcome was a request to change the organisation's values. An 'election' campaign shortlisted the values championed by different teams and was voted on. Colleagues chose four new values: *SORT: Supportive, One Team, Respectful and Trustworthy*. The focus is on the trust and respect that is expected of the organisation towards its colleagues, and between colleagues.
- As well as getting the 'what you do' right, the focus has shifted to getting 'how you do it' right. This includes **the attitude of colleagues** as they deliver services. An external review of the spirit of the organisation highlighted its 'neighbourliness'; in other words, that it acts as a good neighbour would. CBHomes recruits individuals who demonstrate the values that embody this approach: a caring attitude, people skills, initiative, and a willingness to be flexible and go the extra mile. This has to be supported by managers who make sure frontline colleagues have both autonomy and the support they need to do their jobs well.
- It is the responsibility of the executive team and senior managers to **model the behaviours** that they want to see. This includes being open, honest and transparent; opening themselves up to challenge and trusting colleagues; and admitting when they have made mistakes.
- Feedback from frontline colleagues **drives better services** through a recently developed approach. A Project Management & Change team goes into each business area and leads a deep dive with colleagues to understand every aspect of how a service is working. With the Repairs & Maintenance team, for instance, this process brought 80 areas of feedback to the fore which were categorised and then prioritised. These issues will be worked on across the business, coordinated by the Project Management & Change team. The deep dive has identified challenges which might never have been picked up and has led to better ways of working, more efficient working, and ultimately will drive better services for customers. Each area of the business will be examined in the same systematic way to identify what needs to change.
- CBHomes uses an **external validation scheme**, Best Companies, and is moving up the ratings consistently. It has moved from One to Watch, to 1\* and is working towards 2\*.



## Case study

# Stockport Homes Group

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Stockport Homes Group (SHG) is made up of Stockport Homes, ThreeSixty (a construction company), Viaduct (a development company) and Foundations (a charity). Stockport Homes manages approximately 11,000 properties and delivers a range of housing-related services on behalf of Stockport Council, including homelessness/ Housing Options, Disabled Facilities Grants, ASB initiatives and new build development.

SHG accolades and accreditation include:

- Best Companies: rated 3 Star “Extraordinary” (No. 3 in Sunday Times top 100 best not-for-profit organisations to work for, and No. 1 in Best Companies top 25 housing organisations to work for).
- Investors in People: Platinum, and Health & Wellbeing for excellence in people management
- Customer Service Excellence
- Stonewall Diversity Champion
- SHIFT: for building sustainable homes; CHAS: for health and safety excellence; Constructionline: for reputable contractors and consultants
- Tpas self-assessment and accreditation, in preparation for the new regulatory regime.
- The ALMO has also won a number of awards, including Landlord of the Year at the Northern Housing Awards 2019.

Customer service has been central to everything SHG has done since its foundation in 2005. It is central to the mission, aims and values of the organisation, and shapes the organisational culture. SHG has had Customer Service Excellence accreditation for 13 years which offers a rigorous external view of how well the ALMO is performing. Feedback from this has said that the organisation understands its customers and what they expect; knows the diversity of the customer base and has ways to reach all customers; has a clear focus on continuous development and improvement, with many examples of how the organisation uses feedback to make concrete changes; can show that staff are empowered; and has a clear cultural approach to customer excellence.

The ALMO has all the ‘hard’ mechanisms in place to maintain and evidence excellent customer services including through staff recruitment, induction and training; effective performance monitoring; contractor management; and customer engagement and scrutiny.

The culture is set from the top of the organisation. Each year, a Customer Roadshow takes staff and the senior leadership team out to knock on doors and speak to customers. This is part of an approach which prioritises seeing SHG work through a customer lens, getting intelligence from the community, listening to people, looking at complaints and feedback, and using this to constantly assess and improve services.

## Two: Delivering excellent customer services



*Our business is both very simple and very complex. If you focus on the simple: recruiting well, retaining excellent staff, supporting people, developing a warm and friendly environment, then they will deliver the complex stuff well.*



*We launched a new website in January 2021 to make it quicker and easier for Wolverhampton Homes customers to find the information they need. Lots of customers helped with the design and content of the new site by giving us feedback on the designs, wording, and pages they use the most. Customers told us that being able to contact us easily was important to them, so our new website includes a chatbot which can help with our most frequently asked questions. If the chatbot can't help it can connect customers to a member of our customer service team*

### Overview

**This section is about the nuts and bolts of service delivery. Is the business organised and well run? Is contacting staff easy? Can staff resolve problems quickly? When mistakes happen, how do staff put them right – and how do they learn from them?**

The culture of the organisation sets the foundation for delivering excellent customer services<sup>7</sup>.

This section covers:

- Setting service standards
- Using technology
- Staff
- Managing data and being a learning organisation
- Using information to improve services
- Complaints
- Accreditation

<sup>7</sup> We recognise that some tenants prefer the term 'tenant' to customer because it keeps the focus on the legal nature of the tenant/landlord relationship. Sometimes 'resident' is used because it covers all types of tenure. Some ALMOs have agreed with tenants the term 'customer' because it keeps a focus on the need for good customer services that we all understand from other parts of our lives. However, in this section, we use 'customer services' as a broad and well-recognised term that really just means delivering excellent services. It also covers people who receive services from ALMOs who are not tenants, for example cross-tenure ASB services, homelessness services or those who access employment support.

## Setting service standards

ALMOs have learned from other service sectors and from their own customer feedback and data that customers want:

- access to services when and how it suits them
- online options, but alongside other ways to make contact
- extra support for those who need it
- clear expectations on service standards
- 'get it right first time' service
- communication if things go wrong; agreement on how to put it right
- complaints resolved; and learning and improvement from each complaint.
- empathy – not judgement

Many ALMOs have developed a set of service or customer standards which have been agreed with customers as part of their overall offer, or as part of a more formal customer or tenant charter<sup>8</sup>. Having realistic service standards that do not over-promise and that are agreed with customers is clearly important, as is regularly checking all services against those standards to see where the organisation is doing well and where it can improve, and involving customers in those reviews. The Regulator of Social Housing will almost certainly expect landlords to have all this in place to meet the new regulatory requirements.

## Case study

### Nottingham City Homes

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Nottingham City Homes (NCH) launched its new [three year Corporate Plan](https://www.nottinghamcityhomes.org.uk/repairs/our-repairs-service-standards/)<sup>9</sup> following extensive consultation with customer groups including a survey sent to all tenants. A key part of the plan is the Nottingham City Homes Tenants' Charter, shaped around the priorities within the Social Housing White Paper. The Charter's six commitments are based on tenant feedback and the SHWP:

- To be safe in your home
- To have a good quality home and neighbourhood to live in
- To have a home you can afford
- To have your voice heard and be treated with respect
- To know how NCH are performing
- To have your complaints dealt with promptly and fairly

<sup>8</sup> Examples include Nottingham City Homes: <https://www.nottinghamcityhomes.org.uk/repairs/our-repairs-service-standards/> Sutton Housing Partnership: <https://www.suttonhousingpartnership.org.uk/our-customer-service-standards> Colchester Borough Homes: <https://cbhomes.org.uk/about-us/who-we-are-and-what-we-do/customercharter/> Lewisham Homes: <https://www.lewishamhomes.org.uk/about/servicestandards/>

<sup>9</sup> <https://nottinghamcityhomes.org.uk/about-us/corporate-documents/>

Each of these commitments drives a suite of actions in the Corporate Plan, planning ahead to ensure NCH meets the requirements of the Social Housing White Paper, the Building Safety Bill, and forthcoming regulatory changes; as well as delivering against customer expectations. Performance against the Tenants' Charter is monitored through the tenant led ALMO Board, which also oversees NCH's extensive engagement structure, giving all tenants the opportunity to have their say and get involved. The Corporate Plan drives the performance targets for each team across the organisation, while the Tenants' Charter is a driver for maintaining a tenant focused culture. NCH are preparing for the requirements of the Building Safety Bill. A cross company Building Safety group is implementing key elements of the bill in advance of it being enacted, including working with high rise tenants to develop a Resident Engagement strategy.

## Using technology

Housing management and maintenance services are part of the core business of NFA members. Easy reporting of repairs, neighbourhood problems or complaints is fundamental to good service delivery. Technological innovation – interactive websites, texting and messaging services – over the past decade has helped automate many processes for both customers and staff, so that the majority of customer contact is dealt with smoothly with the right outcome for tenants.

Website and app access, most likely through a mobile phone, has become the norm rather than an adjunct to the services tenants expect. It is also a very obvious indicator for the Regulator, Housing Ombudsman and others of whether an organisation is committed to effective communication. Is, for example, a landlord's self-assessment based on the Housing Ombudsman Complaints Handling Code easy to find and read? Are policies and procedures up to date and is it clear how to contact the organisation? Tenant scrutiny of online platforms will help keep them fit for purpose if the organisation acts on their feedback.

## Case study

### South Tyneside Homes

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South Tyneside Homes has developed a customer journey mapping toolkit. All teams can use it to view services through the eyes of customers.

It prompts teams to ask customers about their experience of a service, capturing what happened and how they feel about it. The organisational focus is on processes, people and products; the customer focus is on outcomes, benefits and results. Teams can do the customer journey mapping themselves and use the learning to improve services. Customer journey mapping has suggested changes that, when put into practice, have improved customer satisfaction.



## Staff

While most customer contact should be as easy and simple as possible – and often this means via efficient and clearly signposted online portals – the personal touch is still very much needed. Especially in complex and extraordinary situations, keeping customers informed about progress or lack of it and reassuring them they are not forgotten is vital.

In the first chapter, we talked about recruiting for attitude first with a commitment to customer care. Customer care is key in all job descriptions and feeds into their personal targets. Additional formal training in customer service, such as an NVQ qualification, are often offered for customer-facing roles in call centres or reception areas.

## Case study

### Wolverhampton Homes

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Wolverhampton Homes have an Early Careers Talent strategy which sets out the company's commitment and priorities to advance early careers and early talent development across the ALMO.

The strategy aims to provide support for residents to access skills development and work experience opportunities across the city. This links into the City of Wolverhampton council's 18 to 24 Youth Employment priorities, and will also support Wolverhampton Homes to future plan for succession arrangements to ensure the workforce is able to meet its business priorities of:

- Enhancing community and customer focus
- Providing safe and secure homes
- Supporting people to sustain their tenancies and homes

As well as developing a diverse and representative workforce, early talent covers those with less than three years work experience and includes a focus on excluded young people and care leavers.

This strategy also dovetails with Wolverhampton Homes' work in partnership with the City of Wolverhampton Council to raise awareness of social housing as a career, offer work experience, employability support, apprenticeships (trade and office-based), and entry level roles.

There is a continued focus on the prioritisation to create thriving communities to enable customers to get on in life. Alongside this Wolverhampton Homes have renewed the Corporate Social Responsibility and Community Development strategy that will support social value across the city for the benefit of customers.

Work continues in line with the company's Our Future programme to redesign services that are fit for purpose and based on customer needs and demands.

# Case study

## South Tyneside Homes

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South Tyneside Homes (STH) manages around 16,350 properties and delivers a range of services on behalf of South Tyneside council including housing management, new build and development, street cleansing services, homelessness services and cross-tenure ASB services. STH won Landlord of the Year in the Northern Housing Awards 2021.

A culture working group is led by staff. Staff members themselves produced Behaviour Matters, a guide and resource which explicitly sets out the organisation's culture. It has been used for recruitment, appraisals, staff promotion and to identify further training needs. Staff can also use it to challenge each other and it has helped create teams who model the right behaviours and deliver excellent customer-focused services. Because staff developed the document and values, they are invested in using it.

**Behaviour Matters** has seven key values:

- Responsibility: We will be dedicated to and focused on owning and completing tasks and resolving issues for our customers and colleagues. We will see work through to completion.
- Customer focused: We will ensure that we put the customer at the centre of all our actions, decisions and services.
- Excellence: We will strive to achieve objectives and ensure that the best possible quality and service is provided.
- Team working: We will support each other and work closely with other teams, to ensure a seamless service is received by customers.
- Innovate: We will think commercially, be open to change and be proactive in raising suggestions for improvements
- Respectful: We will be polite and courteous when dealing with our colleagues and customers
- Flexible: We will have a flexible approach to work.

STH are currently reviewing Behaviour Matters to ensure it incorporates the themes and ethos set out in the Professional Standards review

Unconscious bias training and anti-racism training runs alongside work to 'de-stigmatise' policies and procedures and is an important part of setting culture and behaviours. Surveys during the pandemic showed that staff satisfaction increased. Around nine out of ten staff work and live in the borough and a number live in council housing themselves; their deep knowledge of the local community informs their work.

## Managing data

In judgements, the Regulator of Social Housing and the Housing Ombudsman frequently mention data collection, management, and analysis. The key to consistently good customer services is trustworthy data shared across systems so that service is consistent across all areas.

Data should also offer insight that identifies trends and problems. Sitting alongside tenant engagement, data should help to share and direct that activity, identifying areas for tenant scrutiny, flagging up groups that the organisation has heard less from and monitoring service standards. It should also show up any blind spots or gaps in knowledge.

Data should give an accurate picture of how the organisation is performing, in real time in some areas of the business. This information should be translated into a picture that tenants, boards, and staff can understand, effectively scrutinise and use to make improvements.

Staff responsible for data management and performance in ALMOs told us that their key asks were:

- data belongs to everyone, not just the data team
- high-level commitment to maintaining good quality data and systems
- all staff – not just data and performance staff - are responsible for the quality of the data their teams hold
- all teams are responsible for how insight from data is used

## Case study

### Solihull Community Housing

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Solihull Community Housing began a major review of its data systems and quality in response to the Social Housing White Paper and proposed new regulation. The aim was to be able to demonstrate compliance, and drive improvement and better services for customers.

The new data strategy covers five categories: people, process, systems, analytics, and governance. A data 'health check' by external consultants looked at data robustness, accuracy and auditability, and reviewed systems for the 'big six' compliance areas (gas, electric, water, asbestos, fire, and lifts).

The outcome was a new Quality Assurance task and finish group which included service leads, business process analysts, technical analysts, a management information lead and service providers. The team assessed each business area, moving through the business in order of the priorities identified by the consultants.

HouseMark and Acuity collate impartial and external data on Solihull Community Housing's performance, and this drives analytics and reporting. By combining different sources of data and feedback, the ALMO can make changes and measure impact based on tangible evidence.

## Using information to improve services

Evidence from a range of sources helps organisations to fully understand what is happening on the ground (as outlined on [page 12](#)).

Internal evidence, such as performance data, survey data and complaints, can be triangulated with external evidence, such as an audit report or accreditation process and feedback from the staff delivering services.

Feedback from more formal tenant engagement (discussed more detail in the following chapter) can also help build a fuller picture of how customers receive services. Insight and concerns from any tenant or community groups and surveys should feed into senior management team discussions and, when necessary, board agendas.

The Regulator of Social Housing and the Housing Ombudsman both expect organisations to learn from what goes wrong. Willingness to learn should be embedded into systems and culture.

## Case study

### Barnet Homes

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Barnet Homes restructured their teams to better bring together customer insight, data, and business improvement. The Community Engagement team and Customer Experience team (which covers the Customer Contact team, Service Improvement team, and Customer Resolution team) now work together combining all the strands of customer feedback with community engagement, making it considerably easier to share learning and improve services.

Two years ago, the organisation looked at how it could best do satisfaction surveys. Its biannual STAR survey was paper-based, and analysis and findings could take up to six months to finalise. A new independent perception survey works on a rolling monthly basis and gives close to real-time data on the quality of services. Trend insights are analysed quarterly. It also provides much better data on the wider range of its services, including homelessness and leasehold services. Feedback is also sought from people who have previously complained.

Alongside this, a core group of around 120 engaged customers give more in-depth feedback through various consultative methods.

## Complaints

Good customer service is also about providing a good complaints resolution service when things do go wrong. It should be easy to complain and easy to get redress if a service has failed.

The [Housing Ombudsman's complaint handling code](https://www.housing-ombudsman.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Complaint-Handling-Code-Published-March-2022-1-1.pdf)<sup>10</sup> sets out the expectations for the sector. All social housing landlords must assess themselves against the code and should publish the result; this information should be easy to find. The revised code comes into force on 1 April 2022 and the sector has until 1 October 2022 to demonstrate compliance. HouseMark also provide the only nationally recognised [complaints accreditation scheme](https://bloom-digital.s3.eu-west-2.amazonaws.com/housemark/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/02134922/complaints-accreditation-factsheet.pdf)<sup>11</sup> for the housing sector developed with the Housing Ombudsman Service.

Getting it right means making sure that a complaints process is customer focused. This includes asking complainants what they want to see happen to resolve the complaint; and giving staff ownership of each case, seeing each one through to a proper resolution while keeping customers informed of progress, telling them what has caused any delay and honouring all commitments. Finally, it means learning from each complaint.

## Case study

### Derby Homes

Derby Homes worked with its Customer Voice group to update its complaints policy in line with the Housing Ombudsman code. All feedback is collated and reported quarterly by service area to the Senior Management team and includes detail on actions taken by the service manager. This information identifies areas where lessons can be learnt; this may be a requirement for further training or changes to existing policies and practices.

The Customer Experience team meets monthly with the Managing Director to look at data and customer feedback and identify issues and trends; for example, where complaints escalate from stage 1 to stage 2, or where complaints are upheld. Bringing the focus of the Managing Director to bear on these areas sends a clear and consistent message to staff that the views of their customers matter. This consistent approach to quality and high standards is key to developing and maintaining the right culture.

Tenants have a majority on the Operations board – a sub-committee of the Derby Homes board. Three board members support them as they monitor performance and policy issues. Their remit is to oversee performance from a resident perspective and challenge poor performance. The Operations board receives regular reports on complaints and comments.

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.housing-ombudsman.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Complaint-Handling-Code-Published-March-2022-1-1.pdf>

<sup>11</sup> <https://bloom-digital.s3.eu-west-2.amazonaws.com/housemark/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/02134922/complaints-accreditation-factsheet.pdf>



## Accreditation

Accreditation schemes can be a useful way of measuring an organisation's customer focus and learning from others. Accreditations widely used by the sector include CHAS for health and safety; British Safety Council standards; SHIFT for construction and building sustainable homes; the Disability Confident Scheme and Stonewall for diversity; Investors in People for staff excellence; and Tpas for tenant engagement.

### Institute of Customer Service (ICS) Accreditation

Several ALMOs, including Homes in Sedgemoor, Northampton Partnership Homes, and Your Homes Newcastle, are members of the Institute of Customer Service (ICS), which is a member of DLUHC's Professionalisation review working group. The ICS is an independent professional membership body for customer services.

For more information: <https://www.instituteofcustomerservice.com/>

### Customer Service Excellence (CSE) Accreditation

Several ALMOs, including St Leger Homes, Stockport Homes and Sutton Housing Partnership, are accredited through the Customer Service Excellence scheme.

This government standard is independently assessed and provides both ALMO and parent council with assurance that the scheme's 57 measures are being met or even surpassed. The measures are assessed on a rolling programme every three years. CSE is also an opportunity to learn from others across sectors beyond housing to share good practice and network.

For more information: <https://www.customerserviceexcellence.uk.com/>

## Case study

### Sutton Housing Partnership

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Sutton Housing Partnership (SHP) has an overarching New Deal which is based upon mutual rights and obligations between the landlord and residents. Residents have direct access to their Housing Manager by phone, text and email and do not go through a contact centre.

The ALMO is moving to the next phase of this work which is empowering the Housing Manager through place based working to deliver residents' local priorities as articulated at Resident Action group meetings. All of the other teams, such as repairs, caretaking, grounds maintenance and surveying have to support and deliver for the Housing Manager.

SHP has achieved Customer Service Excellence accreditation and recently won an award for the use of standards to support change, with the judge stating that 'this organisation has used the Customer Service Excellence standard and its assessment process to gain honest feedback on their customer service offer from staff, customers and other stakeholders... The outcomes of change are having a positive impact on customer satisfaction, resulting in, for example, fewer customer complaints...'





**Homes in  
Sedgemoor**

**homesinsedgemoor.org**

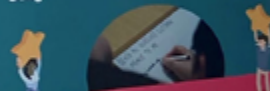
**Homes in  
Sedgemoor**

**Become an Involved  
Customer today!**

We strive to ensure your voices are heard and you have an opportunity to help us improve our services.

Our involvement opportunities are:

- Scrutiny Group
- Neighbourhood Services Group
- Property Services Group
- Customer Services & Communications Group
- Making a Difference Fund
- Online Facebook Groups
- Tender Reviews
- Customer Scrutiny
- Sedgemoor Tenants Assurance Committee



**How can I get involved?**

If you are interested in how Homes in Sedgemoor operates and would like to be involved, please contact our Community Enabler Team on 0800 585 360 or via email at [community.engagement@homesinsedgemoor.org](mailto:community.engagement@homesinsedgemoor.org)

**Homes in  
Sedgemoor**

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**Join other customers to  
make a positive impact in  
your community and become  
an Involved Customer today!**

**Homes in  
Sedgemoor**



**How can I get involved?**

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**0800 585 360**





## Three: Tenant engagement

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*They've got to actually listen and not be too corporate. So, I notice people talk about properties, but these are people's homes. I see it in a much more personal way... And they've got to actually act upon it; don't just say, we have asked them but we're not going to do it...*

Interview with ALMO tenant board member

### Overview

**This section examines what tenant engagement means from both the customer and the landlord side of the relationship. It pins down the key elements of engagement the NFA Tenant Advisory panel has identified, and the specifics of a good scrutiny function.**

Most tenants expect to have good customer service from their landlord without being part of more formal 'tenant engagement'. They might report a repair, make a complaint, fill out a survey or talk to their housing manager or ASB team, but not have sufficient time or interest to be more involved. This is why a 'get it right first time' approach is vital, rooted in the right culture, a customer-first attitude and quick response times, with informal feedback used to improve services.

However, the ALMO model comes with tenant engagement built in. It starts at the top where usually about a third of ALMO board members are tenants or leaseholders. It runs through formal engagement methods such as committees, scrutiny panels, area panels and subject-specific focus groups and down to virtual panels and estate walkabouts. *Every Voice Counts*, the NFA's 2018 best practice briefing, details many of these forums.<sup>12</sup> Tenant involvement in these structures does two things: it maintains an organisational focus on the tenant voice and delivers the feedback and tenant perspective that keeps a social landlord moving in the right direction.

The remedies to poor tenant engagement offered in the Social Housing White Paper have given the sector an opportunity to review these methods. NFA members have built on the structures they already have and worked on traditionally more difficult areas such as making the 'you said, we did' feedback loop more effective. They have considered whether existing groups properly reflect their communities. COVID-19 has prompted widespread use of hybrid digital/face-to-face forums which has made engagement much more accessible to wider range of people.

The NFA has a Tenants' Advisory panel of involved tenants drawn from its members. They sit on boards, committees, scrutiny panels and contribute to other forums within their own ALMOs. We have distilled their views into a ready-reference guide that sets out six key elements of engagement and what each one means for each side of the relationship.

<sup>12</sup> *Every Voice Counts*: <https://www.almos.org.uk/publications/almo-best-practice/every-voice-counts-nfa-best-practice-series/>

## Six principles – the tenant perspective

| Landlord's view                                                                                                          |                                          | Customer's view                                                                                                        |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| We communicate with our customers in jargon-free, clear language                                                         | Communication                            | We understand our landlord's work                                                                                      |
| Customer feedback, good and bad, drives improvement                                                                      | Feedback                                 | It's easy to tell our landlord something has gone wrong; complaints lead to action and improvement                     |
| All customer feedback is valuable data; statistics alone are not enough to tell us whether we are doing well             | Data and statistics vs. lived experience | Our landlord hears, understands, and acts on our lived experience; they want to hear what we have to say.              |
| Customers have knowledge and skills that we need to deliver the best possible service                                    | Knowledge and skills                     | Our landlord respects our first-hand knowledge of our homes and communities                                            |
| We offer training to help customers develop their potential and take a lead in management of their homes and communities | Training                                 | Our landlord believes residents can lead, innovate and manage, and helps us develop the skills we need to do that well |
| We offer many ways for customers to get involved in the management of their homes and communities                        | Entry points to governance               | It's easy to get involved – a little or a lot – and have a say in our landlord's work; we can make change happen       |

**Language and communication:** Our tenant panel highlights the difference between 'officer speak' and 'layman' speak; they want information in plain English and free of jargon and acronyms.

Likewise, data presentation needs to be accessible and transparent so that tenants can easily draw conclusions from it.

For example, some NFA members have worked with tenants to review how information is selected and presented on websites, on signs in buildings and in reports. Are they accessible to everyone? Can everyone who is not a housing professional understand them?

**The feedback loop:** The panel tell us tenants need to hear how their views fed into changes and improvements. Among the proposed Tenant Satisfaction Measures is a question on whether tenants feel that their landlord listens to their views and acts on them. The listening part is often easier to prove than demonstrating that those views have led to change, but it is clearly important to tenants.

**Performance statistics versus the lived experience of tenants:** Performance statistics and key performance indicators are only part of the picture; only when set alongside the lived experience of tenants do they make complete sense. Relying too heavily on data without talking to tenants will lead to poor decision-making, said our panel.

**Recognition of the skills and knowledge tenants bring to governance structures:** Tenants bring valuable input to governance structures. They have first-hand knowledge of their communities and the issues residents face; they have their own relationships with local councillors and agencies; they broaden the skillsets of the forums they contribute to.

**Training:** Competence-building training programmes are now a routine part of the support given to those in governance roles in every sector – and the housing sector should be no different when it recruits

tenants to contribute to their landlord's work. Tenant involvement structures need to be properly funded and should include a training budget for tenants.

**A range of entry points:** NFA tenant panel members also stressed how important it is to make involvement attractive to residents by offering a range of ways in. Partly this is about tailoring roles to the time people can spare or the level of commitment they want to give. But training courses, for instance, should show what is asked of a formal board or governance role compared to the less formal work of a scrutiny panel. Residents can then choose the kind of involvement that suits them.

**Diversity of engagement structures:** Tenants were clear that a good ALMO board should be representative of the communities it works for; and ALMO involvement structures should also be diverse and inclusive.

## Keeping tenants informed

Keeping tenants informed is a key element of the Social Housing White Paper. The government's view is that this is how tenants will be given more influence over their landlords or managing agents. The coming Tenant Satisfaction Measures (TSMs) will be one vehicle for this approach, but better communication will be expected on a wider level. For example, all tenants will be told how money in Housing Revenue Accounts is collected and spent, how spending priorities are decided, how landlords are performing, and how they listen to tenants and use their views to shape services.

Collecting accurate data and relevant information is not enough. Landlords need to think about how they present it. Some NFA members summarise annual reports in both print, digital publications, and short videos. They use infographics and pictures rather than long, wordy documents. Examples include:

- **Wolverhampton Homes:** Wolverhampton Homes recently worked with customers to create an embedded video of their annual report on their website. The script is both spoken and subtitled to make it more accessible.<sup>13</sup>
- **South Tyneside Homes:** South Tyneside Homes annual report is written by tenants, which means it is written in a way that is accessible and useful for tenants. It is designed as an easy-to-use online format.<sup>14</sup>
- **Derby Homes:** for the last few years, its annual report has been only digital and online. A virtual tenant panel said it wanted a much shorter paper copy and so Derby Homes included a four-page summary in its regular newsletter. The longer report and accompanying document are still available, but the accessible version is more likely to be read by most tenants.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.wolverhamptonhomes.org.uk/about-us/our-performance/>

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.southtynesidehomesannualreport.org.uk/>

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.derbyhomes.org/media/derbyhomes/content/documents/aboutus/annualreports/derby-homes-annual-report-2020-21-final.pdf>



## Communication and building safety

The Fire Safety Act 2021 and coming Building Safety Bill put communication with residents on building safety front and centre. Landlords must show they have an effective communications strategy for those who live in high rise buildings. Best practice for this is still being developed by NFA members and the wider social housing sector.

### Case study

## Stockport Homes

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Stockport Homes manages 22 high-rises across the borough and took part in the DLUHC pilot on building safety and resident engagement. They have built on this work to meet the requirements of coming new regulation.

The pilot focused on six high rise blocks. A small team was put in place to lead engagement with their residents and get a clear understanding of who actually lives in the block other than those named on tenancies. Flats were marked red, amber, green or 'not visited' and further information was stored in the premises information box for fire services to access if needed.

This approach has been extended to all Stockport Homes blocks and efforts to reach as many residents as possible begin with door-knocking and phone calls. The team member responsible for each block has a personalised card giving their name, picture, job role and contact details. The card invites each resident to fill in their details in the space provided and, if they wish, ask for an appointment. Mini pop-up engagement sessions outside the blocks from time to time offer residents on-the-spot building safety visits.

The Stockport Homes Customer Roadshow is an annual outdoor event where residents can meet and talk to staff from Stockport Homes and many other local agencies and support services. Stockport Homes used a recent roadshow to canvas for interest in a residents' Building Safety panel that offered a range of ways in which residents could get involved.

The Building Safety team is alerted to new tenancies. They visit new residents three to four months after sign-up to make sure they are familiar with building safety information; and the team can refer them to the fire service's advice service if residents wish.

An A5 customer safety booklet is tailored to the type of block each resident lives in. The information simple, concise and easy to read, and is reviewed annually.

# Case study

## Tower Hamlets Homes

After the Grenfell Tower fire, Tower Hamlets Homes (THH) quickly recognised that their tenant and leasehold residents needed reassurance about fire and building safety.

THH teams met all its Tenants Residents Associations; from these discussions, it was agreed that a new Fire Safety group should review how THH reports on and responds to issues of fire safety. The group was made up of board members, council residents and other landlords' residents drawn from the Tower Hamlets Federation of Tenants Associations. It meets quarterly and reviews an agreed work programme.

The group has given residents confidence that THH is ready to respond to their needs and any building safety issues, and the group continues to oversee all building safety matters under the broad compliance agenda. Where necessary, it has co-opted members who have expertise in building and risk. Its successes include:

- Development of a fire safety framework
- Publication of fire risk assessments and actions
- Prioritising investment decisions
- Oversight of the response to the Fire Safety Act 2021 and the Building Safety Bill
- Development and oversight of the THH compliance performance framework

## Scrutiny

Scrutiny panels have been consistently used by ALMOs to gather feedback on their work. A good, well-resourced scrutiny panel is an invaluable 'critical friend' and will be an asset to all social housing landlords as we move into the new regulatory environment.

What makes a good scrutiny function? The tenants we spoke to said:

- **Tenant-led:** Rather than staff leading tenants through focus groups or meetings to look at a particular issue the organisation wants them to, our interviewees felt that scrutiny should be led by tenants over a period of time, with the opportunity for scrutiny panel members to talk to each other outside of the control of the organisation. Staff need to be invested in tenant-led scrutiny and trust that scrutiny panels can be effective.
- **Constructive internal working relationships:** Members need to develop strong working relationships with each other, and the landlord can help by putting in place long-term and secure funding and consistent support to underpin a scrutiny panel's sense of its own worth and longevity.
- **Clear access to board decision-making:** Panels should be able to present their findings to boards and understand how they will be used to improve services. While scrutiny panels complement tenant places on boards, our interviewees told us each has a distinct and valuable role. Scrutiny members are an independent 'critical friend' and board members are more closely aligned to the organisation.
- **Making a difference:** This means that they are asked to scrutinise only what can genuinely be changed; that they understand why their landlord wants their scrutiny; and that they are told how their findings are used.
- **No judgement, no consequences:** Tenants involved in scrutiny must be sure they will not be penalised for speaking out.
- **Word of mouth:** People have long memories. If their experience of being involved with their landlord is poor, they will pass that on to neighbours and family. Average length of service can be an important clue to whether panels and other tenant forums are working as they should.

## Case Study

### South Tyneside Homes (STH) scrutiny panel

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***“We do it because we want to help and can help.  
We’re out there and we see how it’s working on the streets...”***

Tris Francis, Chair of South Tyneside Homes’ scrutiny panel

Tris Francis has been a member of STH’s scrutiny panel for around nine years, and has chaired it for around four years. The panel is a semi-independent body which is supported by STH and reports both to the main STH board and parent council committees.

Each quarter the panel studies performance data and decides what issues they should focus on, and STH can also ask the panel look at certain topics. The panel designs the methodology and carries out the assessment, and then writes up the results and recommendations. The chair presents findings in person to the STH board. Action against recommendations is measured by staff and reported back to the panel.

The panel has developed an effective relationship with STH.

- Its culture encourages panel members and STH staff to think of it as a trusted partner that shares STH’s goals. The relationship is based on trust and respect, and on a clear understanding of each side’s responsibilities.
- Both sides work to communicate clearly with each other. The panel asked the organisation to change its presentation of information to them; abbreviations and jargon were removed, and plain English was used. The panel’s draft reports are discussed with the responsible senior manager to make sure that they make sense to staff and board members. Overall, there is a recognition that staff and tenants may ‘speak different languages’.
- The expectations of both sides are understood and respected. The panel wants to make a difference and wants to see evidence that services improve because of their work. They want the organisation to appreciate the time members put into scrutiny. In return, the remit boundaries of each scrutiny are respected by the panel, and it strives to make recommendations that are realistic and practical.
- Over time, managers have come to understand the panel and they work with it. The outcome, says the panel chair, has been a shift in culture where staff now plan their changes around a ‘tenant first’ rather than ‘business first’ approach.
- Scrutiny members also take part in staff recruitment of staff members who will be involved with the different tenant groups; a tenant panel is part of each recruitment process and panel views are taken into account when a job offer is considered.

## Conclusion

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The ALMO model has now been operational for twenty years. In that period, it has proven to be an excellent way of managing the homes of local authority tenants. We have a lot of best practice among our membership, particularly in the areas of the tenant voice and quality of service provision. This publication uses examples from the ALMO sector, but it is as relevant for stock-owning local authorities and housing associations.

Within this publication, we have looked at how ALMOs create and maintain a culture that delivers good quality services and homes for tenants. Organisational culture is the foundation for being a good social housing landlord. Where the culture is right, everything else flows from it.

We also look at the principles of good customer service, and the nuts and bolts of service delivery. How to ensure a modern social housing organisation is well run.

Finally, we look at what tenant engagement means from both the customer and landlord side of the relationship. We draw on feedback from the NFA Tenants Advisory panel to identify the key areas that landlords should be aware of when working with tenants, and the key pitfalls that they should avoid.

The new regulation is not likely to come into force for at least two years, which gives ALMOs, local authorities and housing associations a really good time period to make sure their houses are in order, that they meet the requirements of the Social Housing White Paper, that they are delivering high quality services, and that their mechanisms for capturing the tenant voice and acting on it are effective.





*Championing  
better homes and  
communities*

NFA - National Federation of ALMOs

4 Riley Court, Milburn Hill Road, Coventry, CW4 7HP

**Email:** [info@almos.org.uk](mailto:info@almos.org.uk)

**Website:** [www.almos.org.uk](http://www.almos.org.uk)

**Telephone:** 02475 271868