

# Our approach to Tenant Involvement



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## 1. What is the purpose of this report?

The purpose of this report is to outline our approach in meeting our vision for tenant involvement.

## 2. What is our vision?

Tenant participation and underpins everything we do.

Gaining views from tenants on “what matters to them” is vital in order to obtain an understanding of tenants needs, their aspirations and to continuously improve services. We should give tenants the opportunity to influence decisions about their homes, the area where they live and ensure the services they receive achieve value for money.

In order that our vision for participation fully reflects the work we undertake and for us to be consistent with other social landlords, we believe our vision should be set out along the following key principles:

- **Improving communities** – making them positive places to live by fostering a sense of community and ensuring estates are well maintained;
- **Improving services** – the services delivered by us are those that tenants wish to receive, and that these are delivered to the highest standards;
- **Improving accountability** – the views of our tenants are heard when decisions are made at all levels, and that these decisions are communicated to tenants in a transparent manner; and
- **Improving resident skills** – tenants have the relevant skills to take part in tenant participation and we provide broader support to tenants within the community to develop their skills.

Our vision is to:-

***“Make it easy and inviting for tenants to get involved in shaping strategic decisions and improving services, through meaningful involvement and development of relevant tenant skills”.***

## 3. What is the changing face of tenant involvement?

Since our last strategy, produced in 2012, there have been many changes in the way social landlords work with tenants in shaping and improving services. There has been a shift away from formal meetings to approaches which are more inclusive, flexible and responsive to tenant’s wishes. These are described below:

<b>Digital communication</b>	We recognise that not all tenants want to attend formal meetings. Increased focus on digital communication in gathering tenant’s views and opinions on the service we provide, will encourage a more diverse range of tenants getting involved.
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<b>Tenant Profiling</b>	Collecting information about our tenants helps us to compare whether our participation activities are appealing to a sufficient diverse range of tenants.
<b>Value for money</b>	It is becoming more important than ever that our approach to participation reflects an increasing emphasis on value for money. We need to ensure our approach allows for tenants to share their views on what is important to them and that our participation activities provide value for money.
<b>Social value</b>	<p>Highlighting the impact of our spending on the local economy, and providing tenants with training to improve their skills and readiness for the work place, demonstrates social value.</p> <p>Tenant participation can play an important role in this process.</p> <p>Community events, fuel clubs, partnership working, environmental works and lottery funded projects have allowed us to develop relationships with our tenants, and has allowed our tenants to engage with each other, developing a sense of community. This work has also provided a way for tenants to develop their skills, an important, additional social value.</p>
<b>Outcome focused</b>	We must ensure that we operate in an outcome focused way. This allows us to measure whether we are achieving desired outcomes. Adopting such an approach will enable us to benchmark our performance of various participation techniques, allowing us to focus resources on those means of participation that work.
<b>Openness and Transparency</b>	Welsh Government have said to Welsh Housing Associations that they should operate in a more transparent manner. We have strong structures in place, underpinned by local democracy and accountability, though changes that are happening elsewhere are likely to have an impact on what is viewed as best practice within the sector. Our last strategy made no reference to how tenants can become involved in “strategic decision making”. Given that this is now a regulatory requirement for housing associations, it appears likely that this will increasingly become a focus for tenant participation for all social landlords.

#### 4. What is the story so far?

Tenant Participation was instrumental in the development of the CHS (Carmarthenshire Homes Standard) in 2005. This was a standard developed by tenants with a higher specification than that set out by the WHQS (Welsh Housing Quality Standard).

In 2013, over a 1000 tenants contributed to the development of the CHS+, the next phase of development. This was achieved using a variety of engagement methods such as stakeholder engagement events, focus groups, face to face interviews, surveys and questionnaires. Tenants and stakeholders also told us what was important to them. The main priorities were:

- Supporting tenants and residents;
- Investing in tenants' homes; and
- Providing more homes.

In 2017, we asked TPAS Cymru to further review our approach and question whether participation activities to date have been successful in encouraging tenants to become involved and challenge our decisions. There were a number of areas of strength and improvement, as outlined below:

Areas of strength	Areas in need of improvement
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Community events – successful in strengthening Carmarthenshire CC communities;</li> <li>• Fuel Clubs – improving communities and the lives of tenants;</li> <li>• Tenant 2 Tenant newsletter;</li> <li>• Partnership working – Useful tool in engaging with a broader range of tenants;</li> <li>• Tenant Networks – where they are focused on specific tasks/ projects; and</li> <li>• Committed and knowledgeable staff.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Aims of participation – not consistent with best practice across the sector;</li> <li>• Challenge and scrutiny – improvements could be made as to how tenants are given the opportunity to challenge and scrutinise decisions made, or services delivered;</li> <li>• Lack of diversity – particularly within the Tenant Networks;</li> <li>• Communication – particularly digital communication;</li> <li>• Tenant Networks – not in place in all areas; and</li> <li>• Time Credits – greater geographical spread needed;</li> </ul>

*Analysis of where we are: source TPAS Cymru (2017)*

#### 5. What are we going to do?

In response to the above we have highlighted four key priorities. These are:

##### a) Developing digital participation

A high number of tenants have said that a reason for them not taking part in tenant participation is that they cannot, or do not wish to, attend formal face to face meetings. More and more social landlords are turning to digital participation

techniques to engage with their tenants. These can include online surveys and social media. These digital tools can be used to gather a resident's opinion on services, or to ask residents about their views on proposed decisions.

Experiences of using digital participation techniques suggests that this is not only a way to engage with tenants who are unable to attend formal meetings, but that it can also lead to a more diverse range of residents engaging, something that we are eager to boost.

As a result we believe that there would be value in us using more digital participation channels.

To take advantage of the opportunities presented by digital technology, we need to improve how we share information with tenants digitally.

An example is improving how we communicate through our website. Establishing a website specifically for housing tenants could make information more accessible for tenants. This will allow us to:

- share information about upcoming events;
- set out examples of how participation has helped the communities;
- provide links for surveys developed using platforms such as Survey Monkey and Doopoll; and
- Further promote new initiatives such as “Planning for Real” that has been successful in Tyisha ward, Llanelli.

#### **b) Strengthening challenge and responsibility**

Challenge style panels are now a common feature of tenant participation within social housing. We believe that we should consider proposals on establishing such a panel to improve challenge and responsibility. If these proposals are accepted then this could replace the existing Housing Services Advisory Panel.

Challenge Panels are made up of involved tenants who examine how services are delivered, or look at decisions that have been made by social landlords in Wales.

This approach has proven popular as it allows landlords to gather the views of tenants in a way that provides them with more detailed feedback on proposals and service standards.

We believe membership of the panel should be open to all tenants, but for the panel to work effectively, its numbers should be limited to between 6 and 12 members.

In the event that more tenants apply to be members of the panel than the membership of the panel allows, a skills-based selection approach will be used to ensure that all tenants are given an equal opportunity to become members.

In addition to this limitation, best practice within the sector suggest that challenge panels benefit from refreshing its membership at regular intervals. This can be achieved in a number of ways, either by placing a time limit on the length that a

tenant is permitted to sit on the panel, or through allowing tenants to apply to join the panel for the duration of a particular project.

Adopting this approach would ensure that a diverse group of individuals were able to get involved with the panels work, and could attract tenants who are currently reluctant to commit long term.

### **c) Using single issue meetings**

A number of our tenants either do not wish to, or are unable to attend formal face to face meetings held during the day.

We are suggesting that one way in which it will be possible to attract more tenants to face to face meetings, will be to organise meetings that discuss issues specific to local communities. Meetings should be held on single topic issues e.g. issues with ground maintenance. Experiences from other landlords suggest that such meetings are better attended as they directly affect tenants.

Whilst the frequency of these meetings may vary depending on when concerns become apparent on individual estates, adopting such an approach would allow us to gather feedback that would improve the service and shape decisions we take. This could encourage those tenants present at these events to become more interested and involved in other participation opportunities that we offer.

### **d) Engagement to help tenants on Universal Credit**

We have already seen the financial impact that Universal Credit (UC) and other welfare reforms are having. Tenants have told us that they want enough money to make choices, to have good health, and to live in safe and secure homes and communities. We need to start the journey of moving from being reactive to a proactive/preventative service through engagement.

We see tenant engagement as key to enabling tenants to develop skills so that the impact of UC is lessened. Facilitating conversations with tenants as to what matters to them and understanding this is vital in the face of the challenges UC presents to us as a landlord.

Sustaining tenancies involves us looking carefully at the way we work with our tenants and communities through training and employment opportunities. We aim to encourage tenants on the pathway to employability through coaching and mentoring, and by working with partners to get people back in to work. To do this we will promote opportunities to develop digital skills and to reach out to people who may otherwise feel excluded. This will build confidence in our tenants so that they can make informed choices. Tenant participation encourages people to get involved, by supporting them to have access to services and opportunities for employment and training.