Residents' Working Group: Workshop Three
15th May 2019, 6-8pm

The Residents' Working Group met on 15th May 2019 for the third workshop in the series. This workshop focused on how to encourage participation through more informal ways.

The group considered the ways residents can currently get involved on an informal level (e.g. Housing Community Champions) and looked at best practice from the social housing sector to discuss whether these would be appropriate in Wandsworth.

Housing Community Champions (HCCs)

The HCC scheme is a way of recognising the valuable work of residents in their neighbourhood. The Council wants to ensure that those residents who demonstrate commitment to improving their local area are appreciated and encouraged to continue to do so. The scheme is particularly aimed at estates where there is no Residents' Association (RA), to ensure individuals who want to be more involved can be. Although those involved in RAs can become HCCs if they are involved in projects outside of the work of the RA.

HCCs have access to a specific pot of money which can be used to support them to continue their work. As part of the Council's participation structure, HCCs are also invited to attend Area Housing Panels (AHP) as observers.

HCCs have been involved in a range of community activities and volunteering including: community gardening; involvement in local community groups; organising community events such as children's cookery classes, parties, community roast dinners; fundraising for community projects; estate improvements.

The group heard from a current HCC, Alison, who takes a keen interest in her local community including work to reduce fly-tipping, champion estate improvements and arranging community events. Alison became an HCC when it was no longer feasible for the RA to continue and she continues to build connections with the residents on her estate. Alison explained that being an HCC gives her a direct line to the Council and allows her to resolve any issues.

A Council Resident Participation Officer also gave examples of the work of other HCCs in the Borough, including initiating a litter picking scheme and setting up community gardens.

The RWG generally thought HCCs were a good idea but suggested that there needed to be more publicity about them as many of the group weren't aware of the scheme and the process of nominating people to become HCCs.

Encouraging Involvement

The group were given an overview of the common barriers to involvement to inform discussions.

There are several barriers which may prevent residents from getting involved. Some of these can be overcome relatively easily, whilst others take more time and work from the landlord. The most common barriers to involvement are:

- **Time barriers** – e.g. working hours
- **Physical barriers** – e.g. inconvenient location
- **Financial barriers** – e.g. travel costs

- **Attitude barriers** – can stem from previous bad experiences or feeling that the landlord does not act on residents' views
- **Consultation fatigue** – as a result of landlords asking for views regularly, but not providing feedback
- **Methodological barriers** – e.g. restrictions on which residents can participate and a focus on those who are already involved.

To help overcome these barriers and encourage involvement, the Council must ensure involvement activities are appealing to residents.

What should good resident involvement look like?

- **Convenient** – where is the activity taking place? Is it outside of working hours? How much time are we asking residents to commit? As well as other factors such as refreshments and comfort.
- **Rewarding** – does the activity allow residents to have meaningful input into services? Is it based on a topic that matters to residents? What feedback will be given?
- **Social** – does the activity provide opportunities to socialise, meet neighbours and communicate with council officers? Overall, does it help foster community spirit?

Best Practice Examples – Group Work

The RWG were split into groups and each group was given a different example of an involvement activity which is based on best practice in the social housing sector. The groups were asked to consider whether their example would be appropriate for Wandsworth. Each group was asked to answer the following questions and feedback:

- Is the activity convenient, rewarding and/or social?
- Are there any barriers which might prevent someone taking part in this activity?
- Would you want to take part in this activity and why?
- How do you think this activity could enable residents to help the Council improve services?

Example 1: Readers' Panels

Readers' Panel members provide feedback on documents and webpages before they are published widely.

- *Participating residents review documents and webpages published by their landlord. They can do this from home.*
- *The focus is on ensuring that publications are easy to understand, engaging and useful.*
- *Participants are given a questionnaire to complete with their views about the document/webpage.*
- *Feedback is given to tell residents how their input helped inform the final version.*

Residents noted that this was a convenient activity as it could be done from home. It was also noted that this would be a rewarding activity so long as residents have expressed an interest in a particular topic and could see the impact of their work. This is not a social activity; however it was suggested that the panel could meet after reviewing the work independently in a 'readers' club' to discuss their views. This example has potential to provide a mix of virtual and face to face engagement.

Digital access could be a barrier to this activity where webpages are being considered. However, this activity could also include reviewing hard copy publications which would allow residents without access to a computer to be involved. There would also need to be work around promoting community hubs and libraries where digital access is available.

Residents noted that the Council would need to consider how to recruit to this group and highlighted the importance of reaching a wider group of residents, including those who have not previously been involved but may wish to be.

The group concluded that they would be interested in providing input on documents/webpages and that this would provide meaningful help to Council services/communications.

Example 2: Focus Groups

The landlord runs focus groups for individual topics with a one-off group of resident participants who have registered their interest.

- *Participants are either recruited from the formal structures or from a pool of residents who have registered interest in getting involved with this type of activity.*
- *The group meets for a one-off evening workshop at a central location (e.g. Town Hall).*
- *They focus on a specific 'hot topic' – for example, webpages or a new policy. They have a clear, but limited remit.*
- *The group makes recommendations to their landlord in this specific area of work (e.g. an action plan might be devised). Recommendations go through the main resident scrutiny body (i.e. Borough Residents' Forum (BRF)).*

The RWG were in favour of focus groups as a method of engagement and consultation. It was noted that focus groups need to be conveniently timed (i.e. after work) and noted that the Town Hall is a sensible location for Borough-wide matters.

Residents noted that focus groups could be a good opportunity to recruit to a wider range of residents (i.e. beyond those on the formal structures where appropriate).

The RWG highlighted the importance of focus groups feeling worthwhile and meaningful. The group discussed how this is best achieved in two ways:

1. Topics covered by focus groups must be important to residents. Topics needs to be identified through emerging trends in complaints, satisfaction surveys or through the formal participation structures. Focus groups would also be a way to consult on new policies and strategic priorities of the Council.
2. The Council must report back on recommendations/actions arising from focus groups. Focus group participants as well as the wider resident population must receive feedback on the outcomes and how improvements are being made as a result of the process.

It was agreed that the Council should commit to two focus groups per year where one will look at the Annual Report to Residents and with the BRF/AHP having input into the topics for the other. Where appropriate, the Council will recruit participants from those not currently involved in the formal structures, but who are interested in being more involved.

Example 3: Pop-Up Events

Housing officers host events on estates in the Borough and use the opportunity to speak to residents informally.

- *Pop-up events are designed to allow the landlord to hear voices of residents who may not be involved in other ways*
- *Pop-up events can vary, but generally incentivise engagement by providing a service to residents or a social event*
- *Provides an informal route of communication between residents and the landlord.*

  Two examples of Pop-up events include:

  Example 1: the landlord places a skip on an estate for a day and encourages residents to dispose of rubbish whilst speaking with Council officers about their local community and what matters to them.

  Example 2: the landlord hosts an informal community event which provides residents with the opportunity for socialising with neighbours and talking to Council officers.

The RWG had mixed views on this idea.

Example 1: They generally liked the idea of putting a skip on an estate as a way to engage more residents. They noted that this is convenient and therefore will allow conversations with residents who might not usually get involved and allow the Council to hear the wider resident voice. There were concerns that this suggestion might lead to residents only wanting to discuss issues of fly tipping/waste removal rather than more general matters. Instead, council officers could ask residents who are using the skip to answer a specific question or take part in an activity (e.g. write on a post it note your favourite thing about the community and something you'd like to see improve). The Council could then use feedback to identify trends and areas of improvement.

Example 2: The group felt that a community event led by the Council might be too formal. Residents felt that it might be better for events to be led by an RA with help from the Council to facilitate. However, as these areas already have RAs this would not benefit the target audience of those with no routes to get involved. Generally, it was thought that it would be better for the Housing and Regeneration Department to tap into existing events, e.g. have a stand at events or make use of pop-up shops.

Example 4: Resident-led estate Inspections

Council officers would conduct a planned walkabout of the estate with residents.

- *Estate inspections are attended by the area housing team and estates services. Other relevant services may attend as required, e.g. waste services.*
- *Opportunity to inspect the conditions of an estate and scrutinise the service standards, e.g. cleaning, gardening and communal areas.*
- *Opportunity to raise estate specific issues with council officers which form an action plan, e.g. monitoring cleaning.*
- *Residents can request an estate inspection with set parameters on when and how these are arranged.*
- *Note: Resident-led inspections would differ from existing member-led inspections.*

There was a strong feeling amongst the group that inspections are not worthwhile if they are announced ahead of the day as this allows time for the estate to be cleaned up beforehand. Therefore, the group generally felt that unless resident-led estate inspections were secret,

they would not be effective. Instead, the group suggested reworking this example into a mystery shopping model where spot-checks are conducted by residents. The results and agreed actions are fed back to residents of the estate that is checked.

Example 5: Question and Answer Sessions

Interactive sessions which focus on a particular topic and allow residents to engage with senior management.

- *One-off public events where residents have the opportunity to ask senior housing officers questions on housing related issues.*
- *Includes activities where resident views can be sought – for example, post-it notes on a pin board to identify common themes in responses.*
- *Each session is themed around a specific topic - e.g. procurement of a contract or repairs. Topics are chosen proactively based on strategic priorities or themes arising from formal structures / complaints data.*

There were mixed views on this example. Some of the group felt that these could be too large and unwieldy if public and had a Borough-wide remit, whilst others thought these were a good idea to discuss topics and consult residents proactively. Residents agreed that opportunities to engage with senior managers are welcomed and it was suggested that this could be done as part of the Tenants' Conference which was agreed at workshop two.

Some residents raised the issue of major works and suggested that engagement is needed where there has been a significant level of dissatisfaction at the end of a major works project. This was agreed by the group and it was decided that a focus group on major works should be carried out.

Example 6: Participation Registers

Landlords maintain a register of residents who wish to be involved or consulted on housing matters.

- *Residents are invited to sign up to the register and choose services and topics they are interested in.*
- *Residents are encouraged to join the register through social media, newsletters and council officers.*
- *Creating a pool of residents who wish to be involved with decisions about their housing can streamline the recruitment process for future involvement opportunities.*
- *Allows the Council to seek resident feedback on services / online consultations and update residents based on their interests.*
- *Allows residents to participate as little or as much as they want.*

The group thought this was a good idea as residents could be involved at whatever level they wanted and could choose topics which interested them. The group noted that if this was an online only platform there would be barriers for some residents, therefore information should also be publicised in other ways.

Other social housing providers have contacted residents on their register to ask a one-off questions to gauge resident opinion on a particular topic or awareness of a scheme/policy.

The RWG had extremely useful and informative discussions around the six examples of best practice. These opinions will help inform new informal participation opportunities for Council residents which will feed into the Council's resident participation strategy.

The Council is also seeking the wider views of residents to help inform this strategy. The online questionnaire is open to all residents until 15th July. Visit www.wandsworth.gov.uk/getinvolvedhousing to complete the survey.

As workshop three overran, it was decided that Complaints and Rewarding Involvement would be carried over to the final workshop. It was also agreed that the Residents' Handbook would be considered outside of the meeting.

The next workshop is taking place on 27th June 2019.