

Changing places: how can we make resident involvement relevant?

Family Mosaic: an introduction

Family Mosaic is one of the largest housing providers in London and the South East.

We provide affordable homes to rent and buy as well as care and support services to thousands of people who need extra support.

We have around 23,000 homes for rent and serve more than 45,000 people.

We provide a range of opportunities for our customers such as training, employment and access to learning.

We partner local communities to make our neighbourhoods better places to live.

www.familymosaic.co.uk

FOREWORD

In public life, there are some things that are risky to criticise: in housing, resident involvement is one of them. It plays well for chief executives to say we involve our residents in running our organisation, but where is the evidence that it actually works? And does it work better for some organisations and not others?

As a sector, we can at times confuse customer feedback and influence with resident involvement: although they can overlap in delivery, their purposes are very different. **Changing Places** suggests we need to take a different approach towards resident involvement.

In particular the report suggests:

- the measure of success for resident involvement should be our ability to empower residents to achieve their best interests – even if these are not housing related – not our willingness to listen to them.
- the term ‘resident’ should best be defined in terms of where people live, and not by who their landlord is.
- being involved in decisions about immediate, practical local matters, such as communal areas, garden projects or local amenities, can be more empowering for residents than answering surveys and discussing strategic policy issues.
- social housing tenants are at risk from localism and devolution of government when combined with cuts in funding.

I have nothing but respect and gratitude for those tenants and leaseholders who have given their time and ability to inform and direct Family Mosaic’s strategy but if we are to make involvement meaningful to the lives of our residents we need to change, not them. Indeed, a new focus on genuine resident involvement could help communities thrive in difficult times.

This report sets out why resident involvement has failed residents, how we need to reframe the issue and the steps we are taking to evolve our approach. We are not saying we are right. We want, instead, to prompt debate, to set out goals, to measure our success along the way and to publish our results.

I would be delighted to hear your thoughts on this paper, as well as your views about what needs to happen to make resident involvement a success.

Brendan Sarsfield

Chief Executive



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SUMMARY Changing places

Resident involvement has long been one of the fundamentals of social housing: it feels like the right thing to do. Yet, despite numerous attempts to involve residents in how we run our business, and how we deliver better services, the reality is most are neither involved, nor are they interested.

Is it time to rethink resident involvement?

Can we make it more relevant to our residents, and to us? Do we need to define our residents from a different perspective?

Over the last two decades, we, along with many other social landlords, have vainly attempted to make resident involvement work. The approach has been based around two strands: one tenant-initiated, usually in the shape of tenant and resident associations (TRAs); the other initiated by landlords in the form of a variety of panels and forums.

In reviewing our experience, however, some common themes emerge:

- neither approach has involved significant numbers of residents;
- those who are involved tend to be unrepresentative of our resident population;
- the outcomes have not matched the ideal of resident involvement.

So why is this the case? Was resident involvement always inherently flawed? Or is it an outdated model with outdated aspirations, with no relevance to our residents and the society we operate in?

We think we should be focusing on two priorities:

- first, how we can place residents at the centre of service and business improvement not by seeking the views of the few, but through large-scale customer insights provided by complaints, big data, empirical testing and social media;
- secondly, how we can enable residents to be empowered and active community citizens.

The first priority is already happening. We already use a wealth of data about customer behaviour, and actively seek out customer feedback, so we can

improve our services. The second priority is less developed. In the face of localism and devolution, however, we think it is more important than ever.

This will mean a fundamental change of mindset. Success will no longer be measured by the number of people on our panels, or forums. Instead it will be measured by how engaged and empowered residents are within their local communities.

In essence, we want to turn resident involvement on its head. This means asking how can we be involved in our residents lives rather than assuming they want to be involved in ours. It means redefining a resident by where they live, rather than by who their landlord is. This is especially the case for landlords like us, who are not area-based and have stock dispersed across London and the southeast.

To help us, we are holding workshops with our residents and conducting four pieces of behavioural research. Two are testing ways of increasing participation in local volunteering. The third is a large-scale behavioural survey to uncover our residents' needs, interests, priorities and capacities. The fourth uses residents as citizen researchers in their local communities.

We will use the findings to develop a new approach to resident involvement that's relevant to our residents. An approach that uses customer insights to improve our service delivery, and supports our residents to become active citizens, thereby improving their health, wealth and wellbeing.

1 In residents we trust

Resident involvement has a well established history within social housing. Indeed, in the 1960s, many housing associations were formed by local residents. By the mid-1970s, a government-backed initiative was developed to promote tenant-participation schemes around the UK. In the 1980s, consecutive Housing Acts finally gave tenants the right in law to be informed and consulted about matters of housing management.

The legislation was driven by a shift in the political and social climate towards consumer rights, with a perceived need for power to be taken away from inflexible and paternalistic housing authorities and passed into the hands of individual tenants.

Over the next two decades, this model evolved into a set of regulatory requirements for social housing providers to empower tenants, and provide them with the opportunity to scrutinise and shape services, and standards. Involving tenants in running their homes became the accepted ideal in social housing.

Since 2010 there has been a shift away from the prescriptive regulation of resident involvement. That year, the Tenant Services Authority introduced a new regulatory framework based on the notion of co-regulation:

“by that, we mean that we expect robust self-regulation by the boards and councillors who govern the delivery of housing services. This should include effective tenant involvement.”
(Tenant Services Authority)

In other words, while the requirement for tenant involvement still stands, it's up to each social housing provider to determine how this involvement should be realised in practice. And the onus for the regulation of landlords has passed from central Government to local service providers and residents.

“While we set consumer standards, the primary responsibility for resolving issues with these is between landlords and tenants at a local level. We will only intervene in cases of serious detriment that have caused or are likely to cause, harm.”
(Homes and Communities Authority)

This move towards less regulation has not signalled the end of resident involvement. The lack of specific requirements, and the new regulatory flexibility, provides housing providers with an opportunity to review, in conjunction with residents, how resident involvement works. Or, as the case might be, doesn't work.

In the context of supported housing, we recognise the special efforts required to involve our customers and support them to have a say over the support services they receive. In the context of our general needs and leasehold stock, however, the objective of resident involvement is less clear.

Traditionally, resident involvement has been driven by ideals of accountability, governance and empowerment. Its key aim is to ensure residents can have a say over the way we operate and the services we deliver. This, though, is distinct from the 22,000 + engagement initiatives we provided in 2014 through our extensive programme of social and financial inclusion initiatives, like employment support and volunteering opportunities.

This ideal of resident involvement sounds very noble. But does it make sense to our residents? What about relevance? We know from *Missing the Mark*, our research into customer satisfaction, that most residents only contact us as a result of local, service delivery issues. For them, that is the extent of their desired involvement with us: they phone us to report a repair, we fix it, they go back to living their lives.

Historically, relatively few residents have extended this involvement with us. Why is this the case? Is it because we aren't doing enough to engage with our residents? Or is it because residents don't have the inclination? Or are there other factors at play?

Might it be that residents aren't really clear about what involvement means. When we asked them whether they thought we took their views into

account, 50% felt we did, but 35% had no opinion. When we asked whether they felt they had sufficient opportunities for participating in the management of our services, 45% said they were satisfied, but 38% either had no opinion, or were neutral. Compare this to the 8% – on average – who said they had no opinion on the questions about satisfaction with housing services, our contract centre and repairs.

The current consensus in the sector (figure 1) is that resident involvement should be based around the relationship residents have with their landlord. Should we be turning this on its head, and looking at our relationship with them? Should we be examining the role we play in their lives, and their communities? Could we be playing a role in empowering people to become active, local citizens? We need to start asking these questions, and stop assuming their involvement with us is either important or relevant.

Figure 1: G15 statements about resident involvement



Resident involvement is about how we empower and support residents to influence and improve services.



L&Q encourages residents to get involved and give their views on our services and neighbourhoods.



Your views can help us to develop and improve our services



Residents are the best people to tell us what works well and where we can do better.



We want residents to have a real say in how their home is managed and how the services they rely on are run.



We are always keen to involve our customers and listen to suggestions and complaints so that we can continue to make improvements.

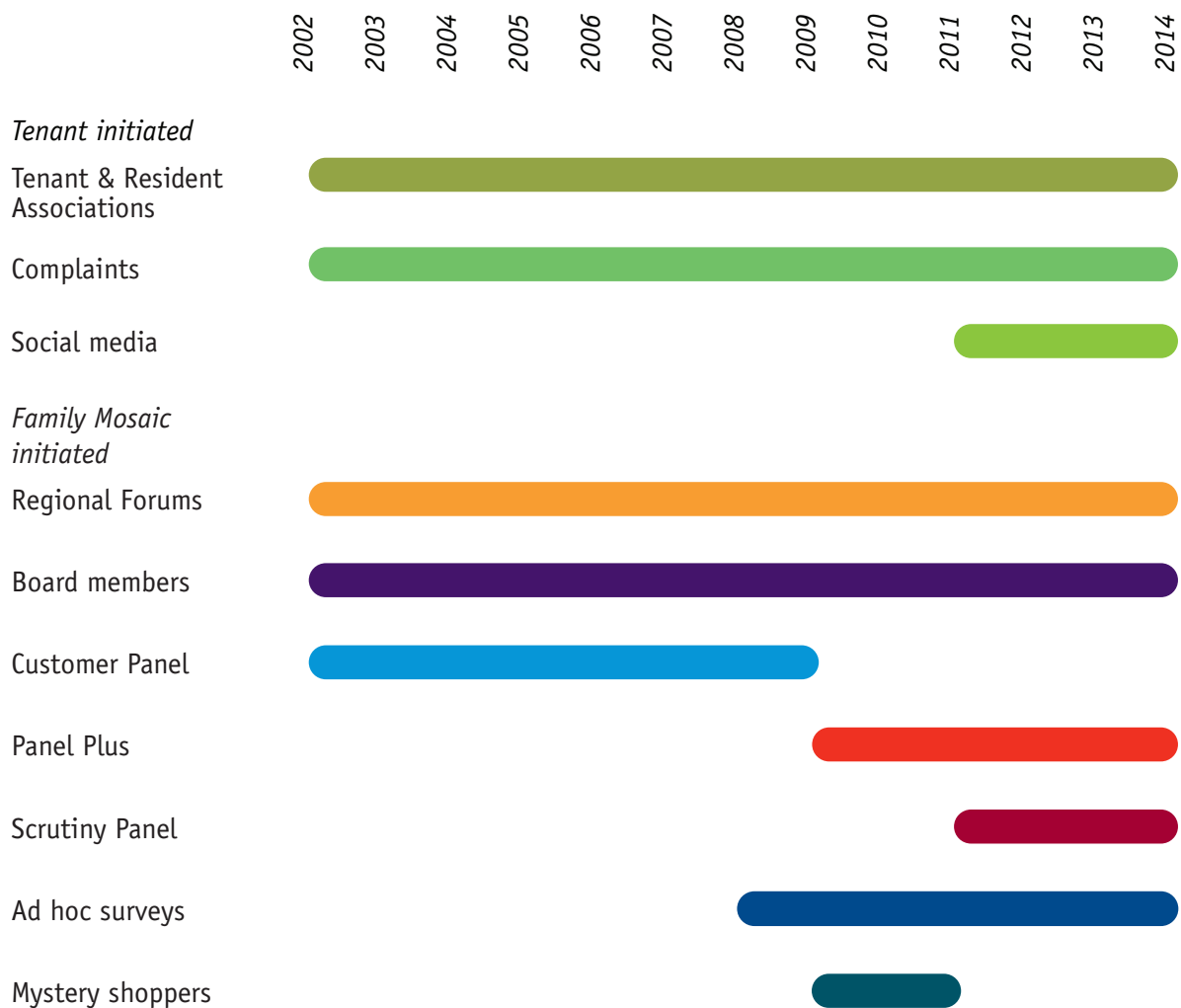
Statements taken from relevant organisation's web site.

2 How involvement works

There have always been two streams of resident involvement at Family Mosaic. The first has been tenant-initiated, and has been centred around tenant and resident associations (TRAs). The second has been Family Mosaic-initiated, and has involved a range of different structures over the past 20 years (see figure 2 for timeline of resident involvement).

TRAs – formed and framed around the needs of groups of tenants and other local residents – have always been at the centre of these structures. These were supplemented by three regional forums, which following a restructure were later reduced to two. Meanwhile, as membership of these forums declined, we decided to start our Customer Panel.

Figure 2: Resident involvement, 2002-2014



The Customer Panel consisted of 900 tenants, who were consulted through surveys and focus groups on issues relating to their individual areas of interest. While the scale and ambition of the panel was worthy, in practice only a handful of people actively participated.

As a result, in 2009, we designed Panel Plus to improve the effectiveness of, and complement our Customer Panel. This group, consisting of up to 20 members, was designed to provide the golden thread between our involvement structures, operating between the Board and our regional forums, and taking a more strategic overview of our work.

In 2011, prompted once again by declining participation and regulatory requirements, we revamped our resident involvement structure. Alongside Panel Plus, we created the Scrutiny Panel. This completely independent panel is composed

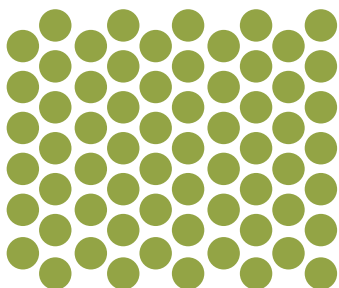
entirely of tenants and leaseholders. Its role is to scrutinise and inspect different services objectively, and make recommendations about how these can be improved.

Over the past five years, we have also supplemented these formal structures with a mix of mystery shoppers and surveys, to enable more residents to tell us what they think about our services. Individual complaints made by tenants have also been used to improve services, providing tenants with another means of getting involved with us.

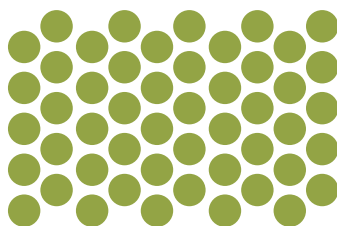
While the formal structures we've established have changed over the past two decades, tenant and resident associations (TRAs) have remained a core vehicle used by tenants to get involved. Even these, though, have declined: at their peak in 2009, there were 67 TRAs. By 2014, their number had fallen to 30 (see figure 3).

Figure 3: Decline in Tenant & Resident Associations, 2002-2014

Tenant & Resident Associations
2002-2009



Tenant & Resident Associations
2009-2011



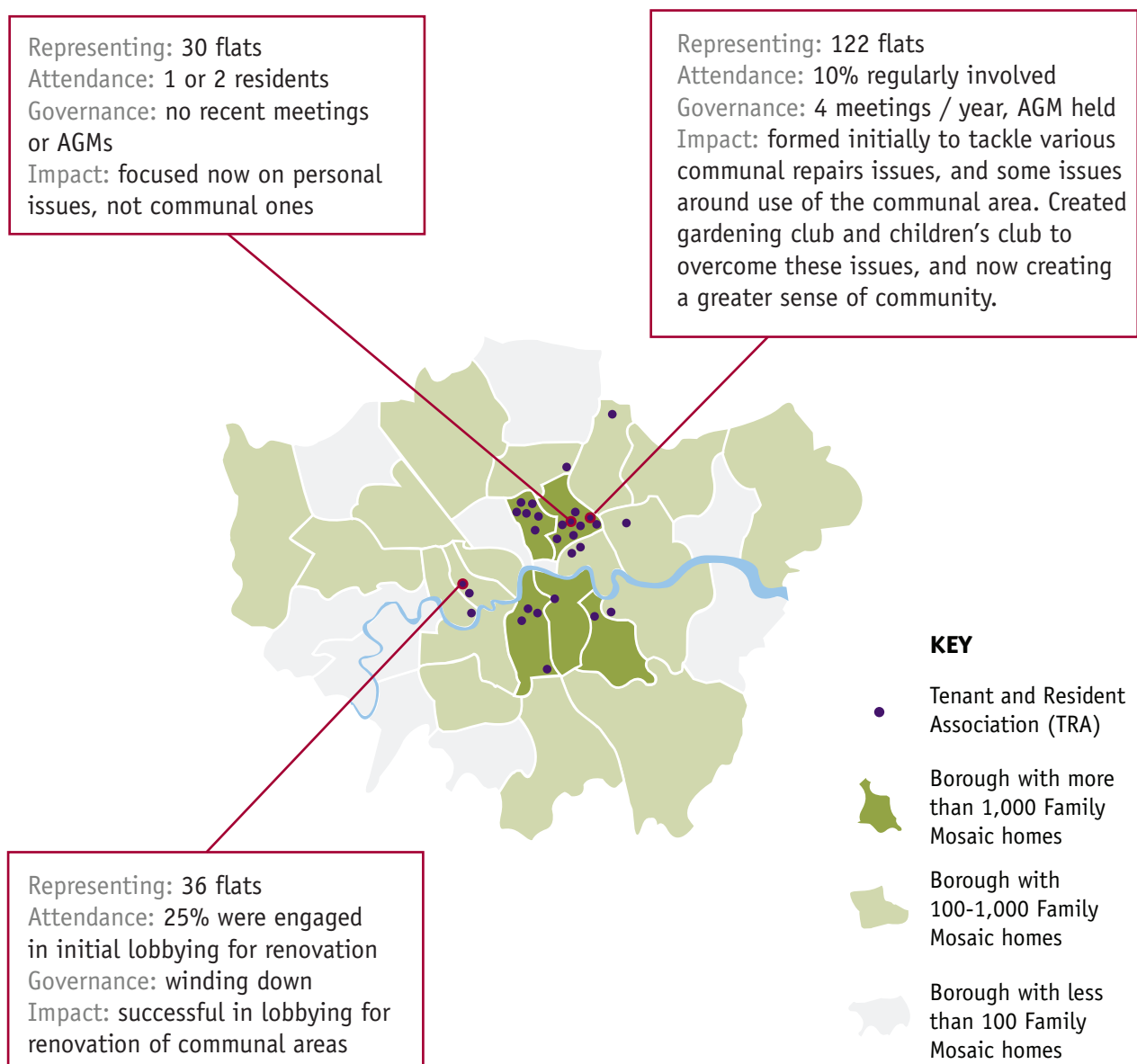
Tenant & Resident Associations
2011-2014



The trend over the previous decade has been one of decline, both in terms of the number of TRAs and the number of residents getting involved in the various bodies established by us. This would suggest that while resident involvement is a worthwhile principle, in reality it is not working for residents.

What, though, about the issue of representation? One concern about resident involvement has always been that it has failed to reflect the views of the majority of residents. It is fine for those tenants who have the time and inclination to attend meetings, but for most tenants this is not the case. How representative are these bodies?

Figure 4: Location of current TRAs in London, and three case studies



At the peak of resident involvement in 2009, we estimate that 2-3% of our tenant population was represented in some way on these forums or TRAs (see figure 5). This is the same number of people, according to the *Place Survey 2008* who were involved in a tenant body nationally. In practice, however, we estimate that less than 1% of our residents were *actively* involved at this time, whether attending meetings or responding to surveys. This attendance figure remains the same today.

Why, though, is this the case? Typically, each TRA tends to have a core group of active members and will involve other residents on an ad hoc basis, as and when there is a communal or local issue that affects all residents. One TRA in northeast London, for example, was established in 2011 as a result of problems with anti-social behaviour in the area. A third of the people living in the 24 flats joined the association, which went on to successfully campaign for CCTV cameras to be installed. As a result, ASB in the area reduced.

Subsequently, the tenant and residents association became a voice for the wider community: it successfully challenged the local council over disruptive local construction works and would be the first group to be consulted whenever the council wanted to resolve estate issues. Three years after its formation, however, the association is dormant. Many people on the estate are working or have young families, making it difficult for them to engage.

This pattern – of an initial burst in active membership, followed by a gradual decline in interest – is not unusual when we look at the evolution of tenant and resident associations. Most tenants get involved because of local issues, for example, anti-social behaviour or communal repairs issues. They get involved, they campaign on a particular issue and they can see the difference they might have made relatively quickly, whether because a communal garden gets built or anti-social behaviour stops.

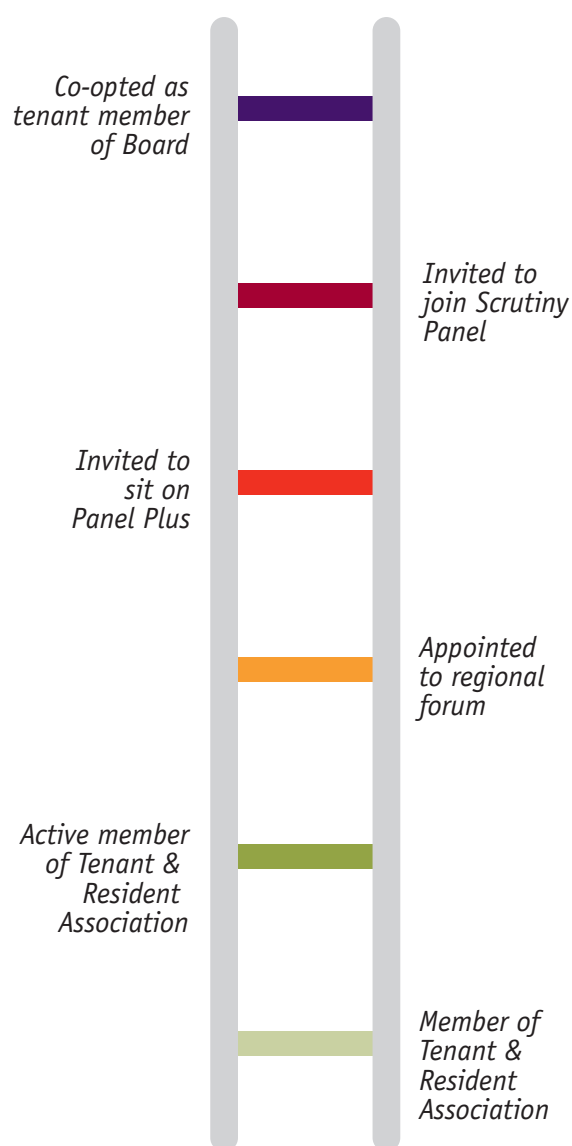
Figure 5: Resident involvement by numbers



For many social housing providers, the hope is that a resident who becomes involved in their local TRA is taking the first step on what is often depicted as a ladder of participation. This model, which was first developed by Sherry Arnstein in *A Ladder of Citizen Participation*, posits a series of rungs on a ladder of citizen participation, starting from non-participation to citizen power. We have adapted it in the model shown in figure 6 (below).

In this ladder of involvement, a resident would move from membership of their local TRA to active membership. From there, they would be invited to, or would be elected onto, a regional forum, and then on to Panel Plus, or the Scrutiny Panel or membership of the Board. The hope is that as they become more involved with the social housing provider, so they would focus less on local issues, and more on strategic and operational ones.

Figure 6: Ladder of involvement



When it comes to numbers, resident involvement is declining the further you move up the ladder of participation. In 2009, for example, there were 37 active members of the three regional forums. At the end of 2014, only 19 people turned up to the last meeting of the two restructured regional forums.

And of those 19 people who attended the regional forums, seven were also members of either the Scrutiny Panel or Panel Plus. So, in percentage terms, the number of residents who are actively playing a role in affecting our strategic and policy decisions is extremely small.

What about the type of residents who get involved? Do they reflect our tenant population? When we examine some characteristics of the members of our resident panels (Panel Plus and Scrutiny Panel) and our regional forums, and compare these with our resident population (see figure 7, page 13), we can see a pattern emerging.

Those who are actively involved tend to be over 50 years old with English as a first language. In addition, women and BME tenants tend to be over-represented on our regional forums, but under-represented on our two resident panels.

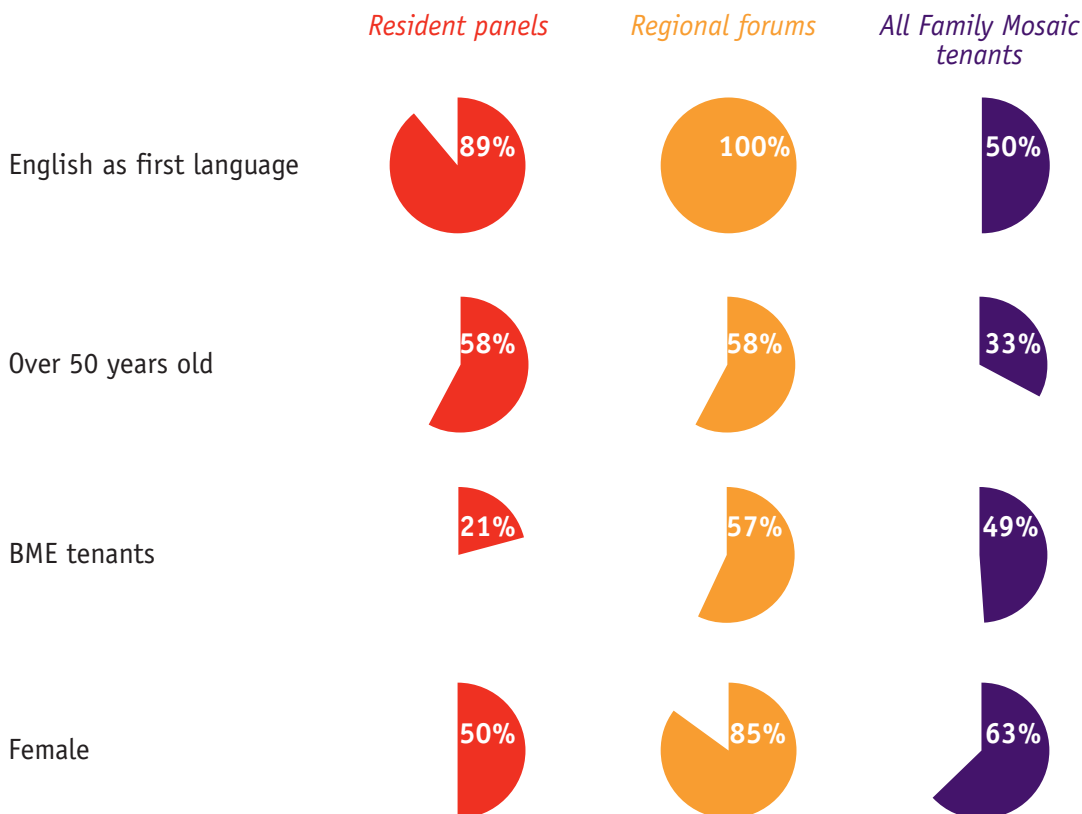
The probability of getting this involved population profile by chance is so small (panels: 1.71 p-6; forums: 1.64 p-7), it's clear that not everyone has an equal chance of getting involved.

These figures reflect Housemark's research into resident involvement (Housemark, *Resident Involvement Benchmarking service, Analysis of findings 2010/11*). This concluded people who were over 55 were over-represented, and accounted for over half of tenants categorised as being involved. Tenants under the age of 25 were under-represented, accounting for just 3% of those categorised as being involved. In general, women and BME residents tended to be slightly over-represented.

So, there are declining numbers of residents getting involved, and those who are involved tend to be untypical of our resident population. But what about impact? How effective has resident involvement been in terms of meaningful changes?

The same Housemark report, which looked at national statistics for resident involvement, showed that per year the average number of policy or service changes that were initiated or identified by residents and subsequently approved by the board or delegated officers is 18. This sounds impressive, and suggests resident involvement is working.

Figure 7: Profile of residents on panels and forums, compared to all Family Mosaic tenants



A word of caution, however: the difference between the best and worst performer in their data sample was 121. This discrepancy suggests housing associations are interpreting the measures or ways of reporting changes differently. The 121 changes reported by one housing association might not, for example, have been perceived as changes by one of the other housing associations. Either there is an issue with the definition of impact or an issue evidencing it. We think it's a bit of both.

The report by Tenants Leading Change in March 2015 confirmed this. The savings made as a result of resident involvement ranged per landlord from £1,000 to £2 million. The report recognised the significant difficulties in knowing how much of these savings can actually be attributed directly to tenant involvement.

The second note of caution: when they conducted further analysis on the data, Housemark discovered there was no correlation between expenditure and the number of services changed. Nor did they find that increased resident representation on the Board had an impact on the number of changes.

So what's our experience? First, let's look at tenant-initiated initiatives. The three case studies highlighted on page 8 illustrate the impact TRAs can have. Each association successfully resolved the local issue around which they initially formed. Some had further positive impacts on their local communities, from setting up children's clubs and gardening clubs to resolving local noise issues.

When we look at Family Mosaic-initiated structures, we can see evidence of impact on our governance and service delivery. In 2012, for example, the Scrutiny Panel produced a report into our customer care line. The vast majority of the twelve

recommendations made by the panel have since been adopted.

The Scrutiny Panel has also produced reports around anti-social behaviour and gas servicing, with another examining the Family Mosaic web site and resident communications expected in 2015.

By contrast, over the last two years the regional forums focused on telling us their experiences:

- they helped to shape the community champions programme;
- they provided input on our customer involvement strategy;
- they improved training opportunities for forum members.

During the same period, Panel Plus has mainly played a role in reviewing our services and policies:

- signing off the health and safety policy;
- agreeing to add information regarding Panel Plus and the regional forums to rent statements to increase awareness;
- discussing the issue of parking permits;
- approving the transfer policy;
- agreeing membership of a designated complaints panel;
- highlighting amendments to the Hate Crime leaflet, which were subsequently incorporated into the final published document;
- raising concerns with the tone of the gas safety appointment letters.

There has, then, been some impact. But, the question might be asked, what is the extent of that impact? Does this suggest that, at a strategic level at least, resident involvement is more akin to an 'empty ritual'* than meaningful engagement?

* See Arnstein, Sherry R. (1969) "A Ladder of Citizen Participation," JAIP, Vol. 35, No. 4, July 1969, pp. 216-224

3 The realities of involvement

So who's at fault? Traditionally, your answer would probably depend on whether you're a tenant or you work for a social housing provider (see figure 8). The blame game, however, is neither helpful nor informative. It also misses the key issue around resident involvement: namely, why would residents get involved with us?

Ever since resident involvement became the norm within social housing, there has appeared to be an assumption that residents would want to be involved with their landlord. Look at the models and structures that have been developed across the sector – including those developed by ourselves – and the purpose of all of them is to enable residents to get involved with us.

This assumption has been founded on a belief that, as their landlord, housing associations play a central role in their residents' lives, as well as in their communities. But is this really the case? Or are we, as a sector, guilty of creating a bubble of introspection?

On estates where there is a high density of Family Mosaic properties, we may well be able to play a significant role within the local community and individual tenant's lives. That, however, is not the case for most of our residents: only 14% of our housing stock is classified as high density. Nearly 30% of them live in individual houses on streets rather than on estates. Many residents might not even know who their neighbours are, let alone whether they are also Family Mosaic tenants.

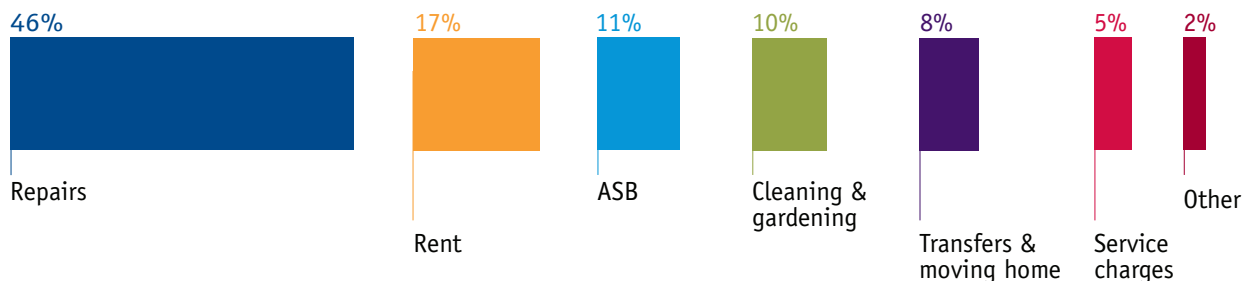
For tenants living in a street property, what's the benefit of getting involved with us? Isn't our relationship with them predicated on our delivering a landlord service to them, no more, no less? Isn't this why most residents get in contact with us?

Figure 8: the traditional blame game between residents and housing associations.



See McKee, K. (2009) The 'responsible' tenant and the problem of apathy. *Social Policy and Society*, 8 (1). pp. 25-36.

Figure 9: Why tenants contact us



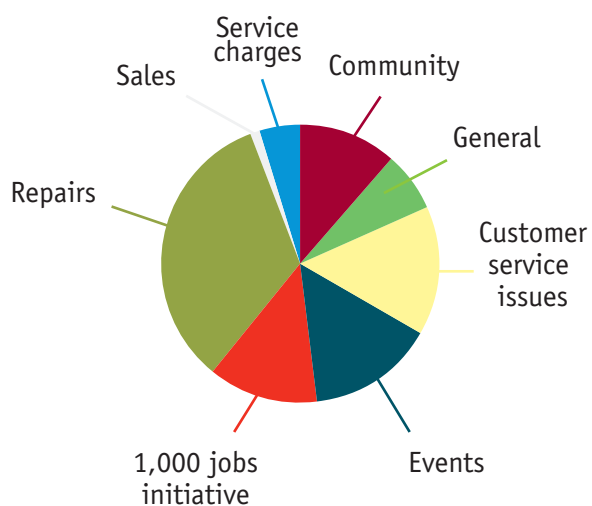
In April 2014, we published *Missing the Mark*, which examined the future of customer satisfaction within the social housing sector. As part of the research for that report, we phoned 3,000 tenants and asked them what drove them to get in contact with us. Just under half said they contacted us because of a repairs issue, while a further 21% mentioned other local issues, including anti-social behaviour or cleaning and gardening. Other reasons cited included rent issues, transfers and moving home, and service charges. Wanting to get involved with us was not an issue (see figure 9).

This is reinforced when we look at why our residents made 263,884 calls to our customer care line in 2013-14. Of these, just 14 were enquiries from residents asking how they could get more involved. In other words, our residents usually contact us only when there is an issue they want us to resolve.

We are not alone in having this type of relationship with our residents: a national survey by the Tenant Services Authority found 50% of residents are not interested in any form of involvement with their social housing landlord. Of those who said they were interested, moreover, just 9% aspired to becoming a tenant board member, suggesting that the ladder of involvement is more of an ideal than a reality.

A similar pattern can be seen on Twitter: in 2012, we had just over 1,000 followers on Twitter: two years later, this had increased to over 3,600. Some of those followers will be residents who are using Twitter as a means of engaging with us. Looking at the 87 tweets that mentioned our Twitter name, @familymosaic, in one week in November 2014, the recurring themes are repairs and customer service issues (figure 10).

Figure 10: Subject matter of tweets



Tweets with @familymosaic mentions, for one week period in November 2014. No retweets or tweets posted by Family Mosaic were included. The events tweets relate to the event held by Family Mosaic to celebrate its supporting of 1,000 tenants into work.

Many are using Twitter as another communication channel when they have a repair or other issue that is affecting their lives, rather than a means of getting involved with us.

One instructive element about the rise in the use of Twitter by residents is that it has happened on their terms. It has become the channel of choice for some of them to engage with us and to hold us to account, just as some residents had previously done with TRAs. And the way TRAs can evolve is also informative.

Take the example of this south London TRA. Established in 1981, it fluctuated in activity. In 2011, it had a new lease of life because of a communal garden project involving local residents. This time, while the TRA was supported by Family Mosaic financially, it opened its membership to all local residents. It is now running fundraising events

so it can become more self-sustainable and less financially dependent on Family Mosaic.

Perhaps we need to use this TRA's experience to inform a different approach: how we best enable residents to get more involved in their local communities rather than with us.

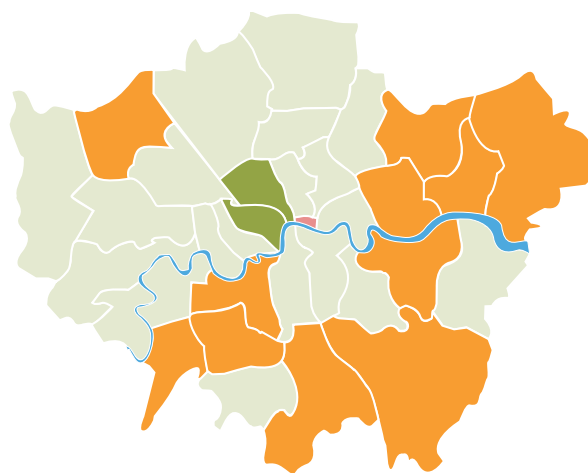
This approach is more relevant with the growth of localism, which aims to empower people to shape the places where they live. The 2011 Localism Act introduced a neighbourhood planning agenda, with new rights for local communities to influence the future growth and development of their area, around issues such as housing, employment, heritage and transport.

Within London, the mechanisms for carrying forward neighbourhood plans will be neighbourhood forums. London, though, has been relatively slow in getting

Figure 11: Localism in London

46%

Westminster and Camden account for 46% of all the interest expressed so far in establishing neighbourhood forums

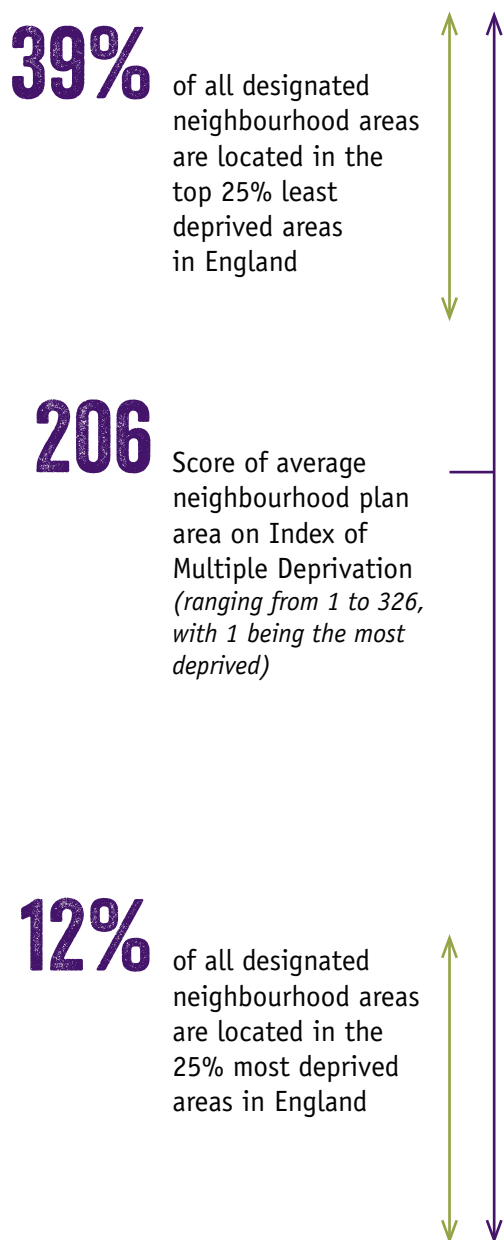


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London boroughs have had no community express an interest in establishing a neighbourhood forum

involved in these plans (figure 11). Three reasons have been suggested for this: first, because of the complexity and diversity of London’s community network. Secondly, because of the capacity and expertise required by individuals to get involved. And, finally, because of poverty (figure 12).

Figure 12: Localism and deprivation



Source: Neighbourhood Planning: Plan and Deliver?, Turley, 2014;

The truth is our residents have other priorities. Many are under pressure, whether because of poor health, low income, employment instability or having a young family. They are operating under what has been labelled by a Harvard economist and Princeton psychologist, *conditions of scarcity* (see Mullainathan, S, Shafir, E., (2013) *Scarcity: Why having so little means so much*).

In essence, this means that even if our residents wanted to get involved with us or with their local community, they may well have more pressing matters preventing this from happening. Their focus is on their most immediate needs: it might be a hospital appointment, a job interview or a parents evening. If we want to make resident involvement work, perhaps we need to start thinking about how we define it. Perhaps we need to start thinking in terms of our involvement with them, rather than their involvement with us.

We know that being involved in decisions about immediate, practical local matters, such as communal areas, garden projects or local amenities, can be more empowering for residents than answering surveys and discussing strategic policy issues. We also know that the more power is localised, those who don’t exercise that power become more disenfranchised in relative terms.

So is there a role here for housing associations to play? Could we use our local contacts, expertise and our financial strength, to support residents to get involved with neighbourhood plans?

Is it time to redefine what we believe the purpose of resident involvement should be in the future? And, by doing so, can we make it more relevant to more of our residents?

4 The future of involvement

If resident involvement is going to become more than just a tick box exercise, it needs to become more relevant to our residents. The evidence suggests the current definition of, and approach to, resident involvement should be confined to the dustbin of history. Put simply, it hasn't worked.

We believe resident involvement should, instead, be focused on two priorities:

- first, on how we can place residents at the centre of our service and business improvement through customer insights;
- secondly, on how we can enable residents to be empowered and active community citizens.

So how will this work in practice? To a certain degree, the first priority is already happening. This, after all, is the primary reason why residents engage with us in the first place: we are the people they contact when they need their roof fixing or their door replaced. So how can we maximise this process of engagement to improve service delivery?

The move towards big data is already helping us in this area. We are working with the Housing Associations' Charitable Trust (HACT) on a project to develop our approach. By intelligently using our data, we can understand the needs and experiences of all of our tenants, rather than simply relying on what the few say they do. Consequently, we can understand how our services are used, and understand people's future needs, so we can then make the requisite improvements.

This evidence-based approach can also be applied to test the effectiveness of our policies and services. Using randomised control trial methodology, we can test how our policies are working, and generate evidence about what actually benefits our residents

on a day-to-day basis. We're already using this approach successfully in two initiatives, one relating to the health and another to employment.

As well as big data, we will use more qualitative channels where our residents will hold us to account. These might include continuing to uncover insights through analyses of customer complaints or through our formal resident structures, like panels and forums.

Can we also make better use of social media so more residents engage with us about our services and the way we run our business in a more meaningful, blame-free way? By doing so, we can start to move away from involvement whose focus and means is defined by us, towards a model defined by them.

Another way forward may be to shift our focus away from individual involvement, and towards enabling connections between people. Somewhat ironically, perhaps, the existence of a Family Mosaic Twitter account had this effect, by becoming the unintended focus for a group of disparate, unhappy residents to start campaigning for a more responsive and effective repairs service.

The power of social media lies in the connections people make with each other. It reinforces the need for us to look beyond artificial, introspective borders, such as tenure, and towards connections based on common interests, public spaces or shared experiences, especially where our residents live.

This leads us onto the second priority: how can we enable residents to be empowered and active community citizens? How can we support them, or enhance their social connections, so that they can benefit from the moves towards localism?

This will necessitate a change of mindset. Success won't be measured by the number of people attending our panels or the number of ill-defined changes made. Instead it might be measured by the numbers of residents we've supported into local decision-making positions, or how many we've helped to make local connections, or signposted to relevant sources of local information. In essence, it will be measured by the number of residents we have empowered to achieve their best interests.

For area-based landlords, traditional approaches to resident involvement might still work. For landlords like us, a different approach is required. We need to ask how we can be involved in our residents lives, rather than assuming they want to be involved in ours. We need to question whether we should define a resident by where they live, rather than by who their landlord is. We need to accept that, for some, if not most of our residents, being informed might be the extent of involvement they actually want.

Figure 13: The future of resident involvement?



This might mean our role in communities is not as significant as we've always previously assumed. After all the hype, to most of our residents we might just be a landlord –and they might want us to focus on that. Or we might have a broader role: as a promoter of local diversity, or as a builder of the capacity of small, local voluntary organisations that add value to the lives of, and directly benefit residents, and non-residents, alike.*

The research

To help us understand more about this potential new role, we're conducting five pieces of research. The first is testing the effect of different endorsements on residents' willingness to volunteer. The second is testing what type of social information is most effective in increasing involvement in local volunteering.

These are helping us to define what soft approaches we might be able to take to encourage our residents to become more involved in their communities. We've found how we can increase people's willingness to engage in civic activity, but not to then translate this interest into action.

The third is a large-scale behavioural survey, designed to uncover how empowered our residents are within their communities, the issues of importance to them, and what involvement might be meaningful, achievable and relevant to them.

The fourth is a set of workshops and focus groups both with those tenants who are already involved with us and those who aren't, so we can get a better understanding of our residents' perceptions of and attitudes towards resident involvement.

The fifth is the largest behavioural research project we've ever commissioned. In conjunction with the universities of Manchester, Southampton, Exeter & University College London, we have been testing a new model of collaborative working with our residents through our citizen science project. This involves residents becoming researchers in their communities. We invited 8,229 residents to participate in the project. From this number, we have recruited a small, dedicated team of residents who we've supported to become citizen scientists.

Each citizen scientist has surveyed at least three people in their local community to uncover insights into how involved people are in their communities and what community means to them. They have now helped us analyse the findings and developed a framework for coding the data. We will be producing a short report from this research later in 2015.

These studies will help us understand our residents and their priorities and the role we play, in the context of their local communities. We will then be able to finalise a new approach to resident involvement, one based on evidence of what is relevant and important to our residents, rather than one based on our historical assumptions.

* See Duncan, P., Thomas, S., (2012), *Acting on Localism: The role of housing associations in driving a community agenda*)

Further reading

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