

### Engaging with tenants to sustain their tenancies: insights from interviews with case study stakeholders – Summary

There has been long standing interest in how social housing landlords engage with tenants, particularly in relation to tenant influence over services provided by their landlords, often referred to as ‘tenant/resident engagement’. Extending tenants’ influence (or ‘voice’) is one of the key commitments of the ‘social housing white paper’, *The Charter for Social Housing Residents* (MHCLG, 2020)<sup>i</sup>. However, landlords also engage with their tenants on a regular and routine basis in a range of different contexts and for a range of different reasons. Because of the growing financial pressures facing social housing tenants, including the cost-of-living crisis, perhaps the most important of these is tenancy sustainment. Reflecting this, as part of the ongoing, ‘*Holding on to home: Tenancy sustainment in social housing*’ study<sup>ii</sup>, the project team has produced an ‘emerging insights briefing’ which is concerned with exploring how our case study landlords engage with their tenants in relation to tenancy sustainment. This summary presents its key insights. The briefing draws out key insights from 32 in-depth interviews with officers from the case studies: East Riding Council of Yorkshire; Southern Housing; Stockport Homes; whg (Walsall Housing Group).

The key insights of the research are:

- The context within which landlords are operating is challenging: they face significant financial pressures and growing demand for their services as more tenants encounter difficulties paying their rent.
- For tenants not identified as at risk of arrears or vulnerable, most engagement was reactive – that is, concerned with engaging with tenants who had accrued arrears. However, landlords did undertake preventative engagement with key groups and reported that they were looking to be more proactive.
- The approach to engagement in two of our case studies has been informed by theories from psychology and behavioural science, and a third placed great emphasis on affecting behaviour change.
- Our case studies employed a range of approaches with the aim of encouraging all their tenant groups to engage. They: promoted digital access and capability; put in place measures to ensure that they could ensure effective engagement with tenants with language and literacy support needs, who were deaf/ experienced hearing loss, and/ or were blind/ partially sighted; and, employed a range of engagement mechanisms to meet tenants’ needs and preferences.



- Case study landlords - in different ways, and at different stages of their journey - were all engaged in efforts to maximise the 'quality' of their interactions with tenants. Underpinning these efforts is the view that an interaction, communication, or conversation between tenant and landlord does not, in itself constitute the meaningful 'engagement' from which positive outcomes flow, but should be designed to result in a positive outcome for both landlord and tenant. Across the case study landlords, some common approaches to supporting quality interactions could be identified, including: targeting engagement; developing detailed knowledge and understanding of tenants' needs and circumstances; utilising third sector partner organisations and community based teams; and, making every conversation count.
- The case studies had put in place, or were developing, initiatives to give them a stronger local presence in communities. These included: holding estate walkabouts; running community drop-in sessions; hosting multi-agency community events; and, encouraging staff to spend more time in local communities. There are a number of challenges associated with developing a stronger local presence: doing so is relatively expensive and difficult for landlords whose stock is dispersed; tenants may be reluctant to share their stories with officers working in the community; and, officers may not have time to engage with tenants about their financial circumstances.
- The research has raised a number of issues that warrant further exploration and will be explored during the remainder of the research and in future research outputs:
  - What are tenants' engagement experiences? For key population groups, what are their engagement preferences? What are their views and experiences of key engagement approaches? And what is the impact of landlords' approaches on their behaviour and rent payment?
  - The ethical considerations associated with landlords engaging tenants in a more proactive and preventative way, which may involve them having more contact with tenants and (non-specialist) local staff initiating conversations with them about their financial situations:
    - Consent and taking on board the wishes of tenants: research suggests that some tenants may not want to engage with their landlords (Hickman *et al.*, 2014<sup>iii</sup>).
    - Linked to this, what is the appropriate balance between being proactive (and helpful) and being intrusive, or a "nuisance" as one of our case studies described it?
    - When and where (and with whom) should sensitive conversations about financial issues happen? Given the sensitivities associated with discussing financial matters and the stigma that tenants in arrears and debt can feel, in many circumstances it may be inappropriate for local (non-specialist) staff to initiate a conversation with tenants about their financial situation. And doing so risks undermining the landlord/ tenant relationship, potentially, resulting in tenants being less inclined to contact landlords when they encounter financial difficulties.
  - How effective are behavioural science informed approaches to landlord/tenant engagement and communications?
- The briefing highlighted key learning for landlords, including the importance of landlords: employing engagement methods that are tailored to the needs of *all* tenant population groups; maximising the quality and impact of their engagement with tenants; and, giving due regard to the ethical considerations associated with engaging with tenants in a more proactive way.

- The key learning for central government and the Regulator of Social Housing is that social housing landlords' ability to effectively engage with their tenants is being undermined by the significant financial challenges they face.

**A copy of 'Engaging with tenants to sustain their tenancies: insights from interviews with case study stakeholders: Emerging Insights Briefing No. 2', written by Paul Hickman, Kesia Reeve, Emma Bimpson, Martin Lamb, Tony Manzi and Beth Speake, can be downloaded here:**

**<https://holdingontohome.org/publications/>**

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<sup>i</sup> Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government (MHCLG) (2020) *The charter for social housing residents: social housing white paper*. London: MHCLG.

<sup>ii</sup> For further information about the study, please see: <https://holdingontohome.org/>.

<sup>iii</sup> Hickman, P., Reeve, K., Kemp, P., Wilson, I., & Green, S. (2014). *Direct payment demonstration projects: Key findings of the programme evaluation. Final report*. London: Department for Work and Pensions.

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