

DRAFT REPORT
Review of resident involvement structures
Babergh and Mid Suffolk District Councils

MAY 2017

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1. Introduction

HQN was commissioned by Babergh and Mid Suffolk Councils in October 2016 to review the Councils' resident involvement structures, assess their effectiveness and advise on any changes that might be necessary.

HQN is a well-established company with a focus on helping providers to understand the needs and aspirations of their customers and communities, to assess their performance in meeting these and to improve their services in cost effective ways. Residents have always been at the centre of our work and we have ready access to a wealth of good practice – over 600 organisations – through our Housing Quality Network membership as well as our specialist networks. Babergh and Mid Suffolk District Councils are members of The Residents' Network, which has been set up especially for residents and staff involved in co-regulation and which has a bank of best practice to draw on. HQN has developed an accreditation specifically for resident involvement which gives us access to the best in class. Our directors and associate consultants have between them unrivalled experience and understanding of social housing and effective resident engagement and this expertise has informed the review.

The work was conducted by Sue Farrant in February and March 2017 and consisted of a desk-top review of documents and a series of interviews with involved residents, Council officers and key councillors. The information collected has been used to inform this report. Sue is a long-standing HQN associate, specialising in resident involvement, scrutiny and meeting regulatory requirements. She has worked previously with Babergh and Mid Suffolk.

2. Background

Babergh and Mid Suffolk Councils began a programme of integration and transformation with the appointment of a joint Chief Executive in 2012. Landlord services are delivered across both Councils by a single Supported Living service, although the two Housing Revenue Accounts have remained separate and each Council has its own governance structures.

The Councils together have some 7,000 homes of which nearly all are tenanted; there are just 150 leaseholders. Babergh and Mid Suffolk Districts cover 540 square miles and their stock is spread across a wide, mainly rural, area.

The transformation plan is still being rolled out and the Councils have voted to move to an Executive and Cabinet governance model in May 2017. There is also to be a relocation of offices to a single headquarters in Endeavour House, Ipswich, probably in the autumn of 2017 and this will mean a change in customer access arrangements. The Joint Strategic Plan 2016-20 refers to the Councils seeking better ways to deliver services, more efficient public access arrangements and better use of digital technology. This includes installing a Customer Response Management System which will enable the Contact Centre to resolve enquiries at the first point of contact and co-ordinate information about tenants and leaseholders so service provision can be better targeted.

It is against this background of change and development that the Councils decided to review the ways in which they engage with their tenants and leaseholders. There was concern that structures had not necessarily kept pace with the needs and preferences of residents and that the relatively small number of involved tenants (there are currently no involved leaseholders) was not representative of the wider customer base.

As registered providers, Babergh and Mid Suffolk Councils are subject to regulation and required to comply with the four consumer standards of the current Regulatory Framework. The review took into consideration the required outcomes and specific expectations of the Tenant Involvement and Empowerment Standard.

3. Summary of key findings

The key findings of the review of resident involvement are summarised in this section.

3.1. There is a lack of strategic influence with defined objectives for resident involvement

All the individual councillors and officers¹ who contributed to this review were strongly committed to the principle of involving tenants and leaseholders in decisions being made about the housing service. Nonetheless, interviewees were not able to articulate a consistent vision of the Councils' objectives and intended outcomes and HQN was told that other officers and councillors failed to see the point of resident involvement.

There are no formal links between involvement and the Joint Strategic Plan 2016-20 or the HRA Business plans. Without resident involvement being embedded into housing service design and delivery, officers working in the service area are likely to feel marginalised, residents are likely to feel their contribution is not valued and the Councils are missing the opportunity to match services to residents' needs and preferences.

One consequence of the lack of strategic direction is that the development of engagement activities in Babergh and Mid Suffolk has been ad hoc. There is a reliance on formal structures and meetings with limited routes for customers to engage with their landlord in less formal ways, even if only to express an opinion on a service received. There is no systematic capturing of customer insight; customer satisfaction surveys were carried out by Feedback Services in 2014 and the Councils have recently introduced a survey to assess customers' satisfaction at the end of the complaints process but there are no other mechanisms in place.

HQN's experience suggests that a strategic approach which is understood and shared by councillors, officers and residents is fundamental to providing housing services shaped by tenants' and leaseholders' priorities. At a time when local authority budgets are being squeezed ever harder and the HRA is expected to deliver maximum value for money, working with residents to understand their aspirations, share information and take account of different opinions has never been more important. In Babergh and Mid Suffolk, the

¹ The term officers is used throughout this report to mean Council staff at all levels.

integration of service delivery and the disparity between the two HRAs, adds further complexity and the Councillors and officers need to be able to make decisions with as much information as possible.

3.2. The service cannot demonstrate that its involvement activities are delivering value for money

Babergh and Mid Suffolk Councils employ an Improvement and Involvement Officer (Housing) whose role includes supporting resident involvement groups and events. That Officer reports to a Corporate Manager (Housing) whose responsibilities include Resident Involvement. The involvement budget was £64,300 in 2016-17 but was underspent. It was reduced to £25,575 in 2017-18 (excluding officer salaries) as the Councils sought savings and efficiencies. This is approximately £3.58 per tenant.

To assess value for money, the budget and staff resource need to be measured against achieving defined outcomes. The time given by volunteers is also a very important resource and they need to know that they are making a difference just as much as tenants and leaseholders and Babergh and Mid Suffolk Councils need to know if resident involvement is delivering value for money. There is no impact assessment in place at present and so it is not possible to know if scarce resources are being used effectively.

The numbers of actively involved residents are low. Despite energetic attempts at recruitment backed up with imaginatively designed materials, Babergh and Mid Suffolk Councils have struggled to get tenants interested in joining involvement groups. It has been even more difficult to engage with the very small number of leaseholders and none are currently on any of the groups. Participants in this project were asked what they thought was the reason and in summary, officers and Members thought it was because people were generally satisfied with their Council landlord. The involved tenants, on the other hand, talked about apathy, unwillingness to volunteer, reluctance to attend meetings and reluctance to travel.

The 2014 Feedback survey results should have caused some concern on two important engagement indicators. Only just over half (57%) of Babergh tenants said they were satisfied with involvement opportunities whilst 37% were neither satisfied nor dissatisfied. Although satisfaction with involvement opportunities amongst Mid Suffolk tenants was higher, it was still only 65%, with just under one in three people (30%) saying they were neither satisfied nor dissatisfied.

The 2014 survey found that approximately 80% of Babergh and Mid Suffolk tenants were satisfied with the way their landlord kept them informed but compared with the 2008 responses, satisfaction with the way their landlord listened to their views and acted upon them had fallen, especially in Mid Suffolk. The figures were:

- In 2014, 58% of Babergh tenants were satisfied with the way their landlord listened to views and acted upon them; in 2008, the figure was 76%
- In 2014, 58% of Mid Suffolk tenants were satisfied with the way their landlord listened to views and acted upon them; in 2008, the figure was 69%

- This put both Councils 11% below the 2014 HouseMark average and into the bottom quartile on this measure. There does not appear to have been any attempt to explore the reasons behind the fall in satisfaction and the opportunity to find out more about tenants' expectations and engagement preferences was missed.

Participants in the HQN project expressed concern not only about the small number of involved residents but also about the limited range of people who were currently engaged. There is no formal profiling of involved residents as compared with the total tenant and leaseholder population but tenants, officers and councillors agreed that they were not representative; in particular, younger tenants are largely absent and there are no involved leaseholders.

The exception to this picture is the team of seven mystery shoppers recruited in 2016, all of whom were new to involvement with Babergh and Mid Suffolk Councils. Although the incentive payable for each 'shop' might be a factor, the Joint Housing Board members also get a payment for attending meetings and that has not encouraged many people to stand for election. Perhaps the difference is that mystery shopping can be done in their own time and from their own homes. Further insight into the reasons these residents chose to become actively involved may assist in informing future engagement routes.

3.3. The resident involvement service is marginalised

Resident involvement is not mainstreamed within the Councils. There is, for example, no apparent involvement of officers from other customer-facing teams in identifying residents who might be encouraged to get involved. Housing Officers, the Tenancy Support Team, Surveyors and contact centre staff all have frequent, one-to-one interactions with the Councils' residents and would be well placed to 'talent spot'.

Conversely, there is scope for the Involvement and Improvement Officer to contribute to the work of other teams and help deliver an excellent service. For example, where the Officer has developed a relationship with an individual resident and has knowledge of their circumstances, they might be able to assist another team or another officer to manage issues involving that person.

Having a dedicated officer risks resident involvement being seen as something that is marginal to the 'real' business of housing management and outside the responsibility of other officers. Equally, there is a risk that the skills and knowledge of the involvement specialist are not integrated into the delivery of other services.

3.4. Involvement structures are not serving the Councils or their residents

Babergh and Mid Suffolk Councils offer a range of involvement opportunities with very limited take-up. The two principal involvement bodies at present are the Joint Housing Board and The Babergh and Mid Suffolk Tenants' Forum. Both have formal structures and rely on residents attending meetings. The tenants who attend are undoubtedly dedicated and give up much of their time but there is little evidence of impact and there is genuine concern about the Councils having access to the views of only a very small number of people.

An assessment of the current structures is in section 3 of this report.

There is no use of social media and other digital options by the Councils and most of the involved tenants who participated in this project were unenthusiastic about using IT for engagement.

The 2014 Feedback survey found that 50% of Babergh tenants and 47% of Mid Suffolk tenants had internet access at home or outside their home. Of Babergh leaseholders, 68% had internet access in or outside their home. (There does not appear to be data for Mid Suffolk leaseholders). Nationally, 80% of all households report having internet access at home so the survey suggests that connectivity is well below the national average. HQN considers, however, that there is probably under-accounting because of the way the question was framed and that it is likely that many more tenants and leaseholders have smart phones and use them routinely to access a variety of applications without thinking that this constitutes internet access.

Finding methods to engage more tenants and leaseholders in total and to broaden the engagement base was seen as essential by all participants in the HQN study.

3.5. Babergh and Mid Suffolk Councils are not fully compliant with the Tenant Involvement and Empowerment standard

There is no tenant scrutiny of the housing service and no rigorous customer-led challenge, both of which are integral to the current regulatory framework.

The Tenant Involvement and Empowerment standard requires providers to give their tenants a wide range of opportunities to influence and be involved in:

- Formulating policy and strategic priorities
- Decision-making about service delivery and service standards, including local offers
- Scrutiny of performance and making recommendations for improvement.

Providers should also provide support to tenants to build their capacity to be more effectively involved.

The standard specifies information that landlords should provide to tenants, including:

- The landlord's performance against the standards
- Timely and relevant performance information to support effective scrutiny by tenants, in a form agreed with tenants
- An annual report, including information on repair and maintenance budgets
- How complaints are used to improve services and the number, nature and outcome of complaints (to be published annually)

- Arrangements for tenant involvement and scrutiny.

In 2015, Babergh and Mid Suffolk Councils put a great deal of effort and resource into recruiting, selecting and training a Tenant Scrutiny Panel. Three tenants completed the training and their first scrutiny, of voids, was well-received with all their recommendations being accepted. Unfortunately, two of the members have since stepped down for personal reasons and the Panel is in abeyance.

Communication and information to tenants and leaseholders is largely through 'News and Views', a newsletter for which is posted out twice a year; until 2016-17, it was a quarterly publication. The first inside page carries articles by the Chair of the Forum and the Chair of the Joint Housing Board about the work of those groups. Contact names and details of tenant representatives are at the end of the newsletter. There is no performance information reported regularly to customers within the newsletter.

The Councils have ceased producing an annual report to tenants.

Although there are Corporate reports giving data on complaints and compliments on the website and the reports include some examples of learning, there does appear to be anything more detailed provided to tenants specifically on housing complaints.

Involving residents in the complaints process is considered best practice in the sector but does not happen in Babergh and Mid-Suffolk Councils. There is a two-stage process that begins with a Corporate Manager (Housing) dealing with the complaint and if the complainant is not satisfied, it passes to the Council's Corporate Complaints Officer at stage two. The next stage is the Ombudsman. There is no opportunity for residents to be part of a housing complaints review process so they can give the customer perspective on the issues that are driving satisfaction. This is a missed opportunity for the Councils, as involvement in the complaints process plays a significant part in setting the tone of relationships with residents.

Babergh and Mid Suffolk Councils do provide support for capacity building. There is a training budget for residents, in 2017-18 it is set at £3,000, and the Councils pay membership subscriptions to The Residents' Network and Chartered Institute of Housing. Training has been commissioned from HQN, Havebury Housing and a digital training provider. Although training is available, in general take-up is low.

Involvement opportunities are promoted on the website, in News and Views and in a Welcome pack. The latter is imaginatively designed and provides user-friendly information, including the amount of time needed for each type of involvement. The pack is sent to new tenants four to six weeks after they move in, with a Freepost response card and a covering letter from the Improvement and Involvement Officer.

4. Assessment of current involvement opportunities

This section of the report assesses each of the involvement activities offered to Babergh and Mid Suffolk tenants and leaseholders.

Involvement opportunity	Role	Assessment
Joint Housing board (JHB)	<p>Approved by councillors in 2012, the first tenant/leaseholder elections to the JHB were in 2013.</p> <p>The JHB's purpose is:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ To review policy on any aspect of the landlord function ▪ To be consulted on and then advise and make recommendations to Strategy and Executive Committees on financial matters relating to the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) ▪ Support the active involvement of tenants and leaseholders in the process of decision 	<p>The JHB has comprehensive Terms of Reference and Constitution agreed in December 2014 (and in need of updating to remove references to the Tenant Services Authority).</p> <p>The interviews demonstrated a lack of understanding amongst board members of the role and functions of the JHB as set out in the terms of reference.</p> <p>There is no leaseholder on the JHB. Of the six tenant members, only two have been elected following a contest and the rest were elected unopposed in the absence of any other nominations. The apparent difficulty in finding residents willing to stand for election to the board is perhaps related to the fact that there is no mechanism for the members to report back to their electorate or for the tenants/leaseholders in the electoral areas to contribute their views or ideas. The Forum Chair writes a short article in 'News and Views', the newsletter sent to all tenants and leaseholders, but there is no other feedback and no use of informal methods of communication with tenants/leaseholders, eg, via Facebook.</p> <p>The JHB meetings are supported by the Councils' Committee Services team. There is a monthly work plan which determines the agenda but board members commented that items were often withdrawn from the plan, reports to JHB were insubstantial and there was usually little or no discussion. Councillors and officers felt that tenant members made little contribution despite encouragement. The single exception cited was a recent discussion</p>

Involvement opportunity	Role	Assessment
	<p>making on housing (HRA) related matters</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Provide a means of improving delivery of the housing service. <p>Each Council nominates three Councillors to the board and the six tenant/leaseholder members are elected for a four-year term on the same cycle as District Council elections. There are six 'electoral areas' for the tenant/leaseholder members, with one candidate being elected from each area by postal ballot of other tenants/leaseholders in the area.</p> <p>The Chair is decided annually by the board and the position alternates between a Councillor and a tenant/leaseholder.</p>	<p>about a rent policy matter in which tenant members engaged actively, presenting a different perspective which resulted in the proposal being sent back for further consideration.</p> <p>Meetings are scheduled to be held monthly, except in August, but in 2016 four meetings were cancelled.</p> <p>The JHB budget for 2016-2017 is £6,500. That figure covers the allowances given to tenant members (a payment of just under £50 is made for each meeting attended up to a maximum of £500 a year), membership of CIH and election costs. Officer time, travel expenses and training costs are not included in that budget.</p> <p>There was little evidence of the tenant members being fully and constructively engaged in the work of the board. The views expressed by the tenant members included complaints that information was withheld from them, they had no input into the agenda, no training had been provided and that the tenants were not considered of equal value and status on the board.</p> <p>On the other hand, Officers and councillors expressed concern about the lack of input from the tenant members to discussions, commenting that some rarely, if ever, spoke at meetings. There was concern that very few tenants or leaseholders put themselves forward for board membership and as a result the members elected were not necessarily those best suited to the job.</p> <p>There is no monitoring of the impact of the JHB. When asked about its achievements most people (JHB members and others) struggled to find an answer, with the single exception of the policy proposal referred to above. There was a widespread perception (within and beyond the JHB membership) that the board was not achieving what had been hoped.</p>

Involvement opportunity	Role	Assessment
<p>The Babergh and Mid Suffolk Tenants' Forum</p>	<p>Each Council had its own Tenants' Forum until a meeting of involved tenants in July 2014 decided unanimously to merge. The single Forum met for the first time in January 2015 and agreed a Constitution which set out the Aims and Objectives as:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ To represent interests and views of all tenants and leaseholders on all matters relating to the housing service (including management, maintenance, development, community investment and related activities) provided by the District Councils. The Forum and individual members are expected to consider and represent 	<p>Attendance at the monthly Forum meetings averages 12 tenants, roughly half of whom are from Babergh and half from Mid Suffolk. The regular attendees are long-standing and despite recruitment efforts, the Forum has been unable to attract any new participants. Leaseholders, younger people and people from ethnic minorities are not represented in the core group.</p> <p>The Forum recognises that it is not representative of the wider tenant and leaseholder community but feels that people, especially young people, are unwilling to give their time without payment and are not prepared to travel to attend meetings.</p> <p>The Forum Chair writes an article in 'News and Views', the newsletter sent to tenants and leaseholders and the Spring 2017 article was a direct appeal for more people to attend meetings or give their views in other ways.</p> <p>There is no other route by which the Forum can inform other residents of its activities. A Facebook page has been discussed but not yet actioned.</p> <p>There has been an uneasy relationship with the board since the JHB's creation, although the current Forum Chair and board Vice Chair are working to improve communication and mutual understanding.</p> <p>Training is offered to Forum members but take up is minimal; one participant reported having done a computer course.</p> <p>In April 2016, the Forum worked with officers to address concerns about its effectiveness and value for money. A new approach was agreed in which the Forum would have a quarterly meeting with officers to discuss a particular area of service and would use the other two meetings in the quarter to prepare and review without officer support. This is still bedding down but the</p>

Involvement opportunity	Role	Assessment
	<p>the views of all tenants and leaseholders where practical</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ To review, consider and provide feedback to the District Councils on plans policies and procedures regarding housing and related services, including ideas and methods for improving existing service ▪ To promote the interests of tenants and leaseholders in the consideration of local and national housing policy ▪ To actively promote tenant involvement through liaison with the Tenant Involvement Officer. <p>Membership is open to all tenants and leaseholders</p>	<p>Forum and officers feels it has started well.</p> <p>There is no method in place to evaluate the Forum's impact and when asked Forum members found it hard to give examples of things they had achieved or changed on behalf of other residents since 2015. The Chair was able to say that the Councils had changed the timing of a rent letter and the website now made tenant repair responsibility clearer as a result of the Forum's work. Other participants seemed to understand their role as taking up issues on behalf of individual tenants in their neighbourhoods. There was also some focus on matters of personal concern.</p> <p>A budget of £300 has been allocated for 2017-18 to cover costs of room hire (should council premises not be available) and catering for the Forum. Travel and training come from other budgets.</p>

Involvement opportunity	Role	Assessment
	<p>of both Councils and members elect a Forum Chair, Vice Chair, Secretary and seven committee members at the AGM.</p> <p>The Forum meets monthly during the day in the Council offices in either Hadleigh or Needham Market and participants can claim travel expenses.</p>	
<p>Scrutiny Panel</p>	<p>A Tenant Scrutiny Panel was established in 2015 with the aims of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Acting as a driver for continuous improvement in performance and excellence through the process of customer-led scrutiny ▪ Ensuring that tenants' views, aspirations and priorities are central to the performance 	<p>Recruitment to the Scrutiny Panel was very difficult and only three tenants completed the training and undertook part in the voids review. Since then, two members have had to drop out for personal reasons and the Scrutiny Panel is in abeyance.</p> <p>The voids scrutiny report was well received and all ten recommendations were accepted by the Councils. An update on progress with implementation was presented to the JHB by the Improvement and Involvement Officer in April 2017.</p> <p>Expenditure on the Scrutiny Panel in 2016-17 was £3,900. No specific budget is allocated for 2017-18, although resources will be made available from the RI budgets if required.</p>

Involvement opportunity	Role	Assessment
	<p>framework for housing services at Babergh and Mid Suffolk District Councils.</p> <p>External support was commissioned for recruitment, selection and training of Panel members. An Independent Chair was appointed on a voluntary basis but resigned before completing the training.</p> <p>The Panel completed a scrutiny review of the voids service early in 2016.</p>	
<p>Mystery Shoppers</p>	<p>There is a team of seven mystery shoppers in place. They carry out three 'shops' of housing services a year, earning up to £25 worth of shopping vouchers for each. They have a code of conduct and training was provided by an external trainer.</p>	<p>Their first shop of Customer Services in June/July 2015 was a training exercise and they have since completed shops of Repairs Reporting in November/December 2015 and Tenancy Services in May-July 2016.</p> <p>The shoppers meet the Improvement and Involvement Officer (Housing) after each shop to compile a report and action plan which then go to JHB. The Improvement and Involvement Officer (Housing) is responsible for ensuring that the action plan is implemented.</p> <p>There has not yet been an evaluation of the impact of the mystery shoppers. The team is to carry out their third independent shop, of the restructured repairs service, later in 2017 and an evaluation session will be held after that.</p>

Involvement opportunity	Role	Assessment
		<p>The mystery shoppers are all new to involvement with Babergh and Mid Suffolk.</p> <p>There is a budget of £585 for 2017-18, that figure includes the incentive payments and room hire for the debriefing sessions.</p>
Estate Inspectors	<p>The Inspectors' role is to monitor the condition of communal areas on the estates and report any issues to the Improvement and Involvement Officer. The officer passes reports on to the relevant services for action.</p> <p>Inspectors are thanked with a £5 shopping voucher each month they send in a report.</p>	<p>There are currently three active Tenant Inspectors who send in a report form on an ad hoc basis when they spot a problem. There has been little activity for some time.</p>
Tenant Inspectors	<p>To survey tenants and leaseholders who have recently received a service. Shopping vouchers are offered as a 'thank you' for each inspection, up to a value of £30 a year.</p>	<p>There have been no volunteers.</p>

Involvement opportunity	Role	Assessment
Reading Group	To review and contribute ideas for the newsletter and to comment on the website and written material.	There have been no volunteers.

5. Strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats

The following table summarises HQN's view of the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats associated with resident involvement in Babergh and Mid Suffolk Councils.

Strengths	Weaknesses	Opportunities	Threats
<p>A strong commitment to involvement from the Councils' political leaders.</p> <p>A core of tenants who have been involved for a long time and who are knowledgeable and committed.</p> <p>Good quality information about involvement opportunities is offered to residents.</p> <p>Tenants and leaseholders</p>	<p>No strategy for resident involvement and no formal link with the Joint Strategic Plan or the HRA Business Plans.</p> <p>No systematic impact assessment and therefore no evidence of value for money.</p> <p>The number of involved residents is very small and they are not representative of the tenant and leaseholder customer</p>	<p>Scope for developing the use of social media and other digital channels.</p> <p>The new in-house maintenance service, BMBS, gives a reason to engage with residents to get feedback.</p> <p>The continuing transformation project, particularly changes to customer access and data collection, offer opportunities to do things differently.</p>	<p>Continuing pressure on local authority budgets.</p> <p>Disparity in HRAs of Babergh and Mid Suffolk Councils could lead to tenant dissatisfaction and make it difficult to sustain joint tenant involvement structures.</p> <p>Resistance amongst involved residents to adopting new ways of working, and especially digital technology.</p>

Strengths	Weaknesses	Opportunities	Threats
<p>appear to be broadly satisfied with housing services.</p>	<p>base of the Councils.</p> <p>Tenants and leaseholders are unwilling to engage with existing involvement structures; strenuous recruitment efforts have not succeeded in increasing numbers or broadening the base of the involvement.</p> <p>There is no digital engagement with residents.</p> <p>Tenants and leaseholders appear to be broadly satisfied with the services they receive, meaning there is no stimulus to involvement.</p> <p>On some key engagement measures, satisfaction fell between 2008 and 2014 (both Councils) and the reasons are not known.</p> <p>The Councils are not fully compliant with the Regulatory Framework.</p>		

6. Moving forward

The existing involvement structures operating within Babergh and Mid Suffolk are not working effectively for either the organisation or its residents.

In considering an alternative model, HQN has particularly taken into account:

- The largely rural nature of the Districts and the distribution of tenanted and leasehold homes across a wide area
- The continuing transformation programme and the move into a single office building in Ipswich which will not be readily accessible in person for many tenants and leaseholders
- The low number of engaged residents and the apparent lack of enthusiasm for formal structures and meetings
- The lack of information available to the Councils about their residents' involvement (and other) preferences
- The absence of digital engagement.

HQN consequently recommends a phased approach to developing an alternative model.

Phase one: Disband all existing engagement structures, with the possible exception of mystery shopping. Carry out a major consultation exercise with tenants and leaseholders, using a variety of methods, to gain an understanding of what information they want, which engagement methods they would prefer and what would motivate them to or deter them from getting involved. At the same time, work with councillors and officers to define the Councils' objectives and preferred outcomes for resident involvement.

Phase two: Once that information is available, analyse the findings and, in discussion with residents, develop appropriate approaches to involvement. Make an explicit link to the Councils' strategic objectives and develop impact assessment methods. Set budgets. Plan a recruitment strategy with targets for demographic representation. Develop a volunteer training and development programme, to include incentives and annual meetings with individual volunteers to assess achievements and training needs and to address any issues. Put mechanisms in place to ensure the wider tenant/leaseholder community is kept informed and is able to feed information into the engagement structures. Put in place mechanisms for collecting customer insight data on service delivery, eg, use of SMS to get real time repair satisfaction data.

Phase three: Implement the new engagement structures. Monitor impact, adjusting as necessary. Report regularly to tenants, leaseholders and members. Use customer insight data to inform the work of the new structures as well as corporate decision-making. Keep the new model under review to check that it is meeting residents' needs and expectations and can demonstrate value for money.

6.1. Possible structures

In accordance with best practice and in order to meet the requirements of the Regulator, HQN suggests that the following are considered in some form as part of the new resident involvement model in Babergh and Mid Suffolk.

- **A strategic group** of residents selected against agreed criteria which provides a constructive, evidence-based challenge to Cabinet. (It might be preferable for each Council to have its own group.) The group(s) would be independent of the governance structure and would be accountable to the wider tenant and leaseholder community, receiving information from formal and informal engagement activities and reporting back on a regular basis. The group would receive and analyse performance data, including complaints analysis, and might commission topic-based scrutinies using task and finish groups
- **A complaints panel** for resolving housing complaints which includes specially selected and trained tenants/leaseholders
- **Sounding board(s)** of tenants/leaseholders who will give their views on, eg, proposed policy or service changes on an 'as needed' basis. The pool of residents to call on should be as large and comprehensive as possible with information about their particular interests and preferred contact methods kept up to date. Consultation should be via a range of methods, including telephone, email, SMS, Skype, online surveys or Facebook as well as face to face when necessary.

6.2. Impact assessment

Involving residents is not an end in itself but must have objectives and measurable outcomes so that its value for money can be demonstrated to the Council(s) and residents. Babergh and Mid Suffolk Councils are strongly advised to design and put in place appropriate assessment mechanisms as new involvement structures are established.

Most approaches to impact assessment are based on the number of changes that have been made as a direct result of resident involvement. The easiest way is to track how many recommendations made by, for example, a scrutiny panel, are accepted and implemented by the housing service. One model assesses the level of tenant input on a scale of one to ten against the outcomes achieved for tenants, also assessed on a scale of one to ten. Others attempt to quantify savings made as a result of tenant suggestions.

7. Conclusion

HQN recognises the efforts that have been made by Babergh and Mid Suffolk District councillors, officers and residents over many years to make resident involvement work. Although there have been some successes and the Joint Housing Board in particular was an innovative approach to meaningful engagement at a strategic level, it is clear that the current model is no longer fit for purpose. The Councils are to be commended for making

the decision to commission this review and we hope that the report will help to move things forward successfully.

HQN would like to thank the councillors, officers and tenants who contributed to this review.

HQN provides high-quality advice, tailored support and training to housing associations, councils, ALMOs and other housing providers.

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Events: events@hqnetwork.co.uk

Networks: networks@hqnetwork.co.uk

Support work: Anna Pattison - anna.pattison@hqnetwork.co.uk

Training and Development Services: training@hqnetwork.co.uk

Rockingham House | St Maurice's Road
York | YO31 7JA

Telephone | 0845 4747 004
Fax | 0845 4747 006

Internet | www.hqnetwork.co.uk
Email | hqn@hqnetwork.co.uk

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