

Diversity Peer Challenge

Tower Hamlets Homes

9-10 June 2011

Report

1. Background

This report is a summary of the findings of a Diversity Peer Challenge organised by the Local Government Improvement and Development and carried out by its trained peers. The report satisfies the requirements of the Social Housing Equality Framework for an external assessment at the Achieving level. The Peer Challenge is designed to validate an organisation's own self-assessment at the Achieving Level by considering documentary evidence and by carrying out a series of interviews and focus groups with employees and other stakeholders.

The basis for the Peer Challenge is a benchmark against five areas of performance. They are:

- Knowing your communities and equality mapping
- Leadership, partnership and organisational commitment
- Community engagement and satisfaction
- Responsive services and customer care
- A progressive and diverse workforce

The Peer Challenge is not an inspection rather it offers an external assessment of an Arms Lengths Management Organisation's own judgement of itself against the Equality Framework benchmark, by critical friends who have experience of delivering an equality/diversity agenda in their own organisations.

Peers were:

Alima Qureshi, LB Hackney
Cllr Tony Newman, LB Croydon
Stuart Long, South Essex Homes

The team appreciates the welcome and hospitality provided by Tower Hamlets Homes and would like to thank everybody that they met during the process for their time and contributions.

Tower Hamlets Homes made the following observations upon the impact the peer challenge has had

The peer challenge helped to focus our approach in ensuring that our services are accessible inclusive and fair.

The process itself helped us to give a higher profile to equality and diversity initiatives within the organisation, whilst the insight provided by the peer reviewers will prove invaluable in assisting us make the right choices with residents and partners, to continue to make progress towards the excellence level.

2. Executive summary and recommendations

Following this Diversity Peer Challenge, we have reached the following conclusion:

Tower Hamlets Homes has completed a satisfactory self-assessment against the criteria for the Achieving level of the Social Housing Equality Framework.

THH has been on an impressive improvement journey, moving from zero stars in 2008 to two stars in the Audit Commission inspection that took place in November last year. Effective mechanisms for equalities mapping and improving customer focus and residents' engagement was at the heart of this improvement journey. THH has invested to improve its customer profile and uses this intelligence to plan services and promote equality of opportunity. Staff are supported and encouraged to use customer intelligence when engaging with residents. Guided by a clear organisational purpose and objectives, there is clear and personal leadership among the Board and senior managers and THH has devised a range of mechanism for resident engagement. There are good links with partners resulting in many projects to improve lives of residents and initiatives to tackle more deep sited problem in the Borough, such as overcrowding or tackling anti-social behaviour.

The challenge team recognises that THH is building on a solid foundation and emphasises the need to consolidate and embed its achievements in order to move to the excellent level which requires THH to demonstrate examples of outcome. A quote from the resident focus group worth highlighting is '*THH needs to stand still in order to listen*', and with that making time available to reflect on its achievements to date as well as areas for improvement. Key building blocks for the journey to excellent are a shift of responsibility for processes such as equalities impact assessments to heads of services and officers; the adoption of a broader range of mechanisms for resident involvement and continuous engagement with staff and contractors to maintain the focus on intelligence and customer led services. The collection and sharing of examples of outcomes both internally and externally will help to promote achievements and serve as examples and inspiration within the organisation.

To help Tower Hamlets Homes improve further the team has made a number of recommendations. These are:

R1: Continue the work on equalities profiling but consider a further breakdown of the 'other' category under the ethnicity strand, including 'other white'. Given the significant ethnic diversity of Tower Hamlets this will ensure more a sophisticated approach to service planning and delivery.

R2: Continue work to improve staff diversity by evidencing more female and Asian staff at senior level by providing staff with short and longer term positive action initiatives such as the accredited development opportunities. Publish workforce data regularly with what work is being done to address the imbalance. This will raise people's confidence and trust in THH.

R3: Where services have been designed for residents, for example translated customer magazine or talking documents, ensure that theses are widely promoted to the to the intended recipients.

R4: Shift the responsibility and ownership of Equalities Impact Assessments firmly into the realm of Heads of Services and service managers. Using leadership and conversations ensure that these are seen as purposeful tools rather than 'forms to complete'.

R5: Develop mechanisms for strategic tenants and partner scrutiny.

R6: Broaden your engagement offer for residents and boost the numbers of residents to get involved. Appendix A provides some suggestions from the peer team on how to go about this.

R7: Negotiate to becoming an integrated partner of the Council's senior level Partnership Board meetings such as the Communities and Partnerships Localism Board in order to influence decisions on policy and resource allocation around the 'One Tower Hamlets' commitment to tackle homelessness and overcrowding.

R8: Consider the use of a systemic approach to find solutions to some of the big strategic problems such as over crowding. This would involve working with 'the entire system' and may give you new ideas of how to tackle these pressing problems. Examples would be the use of Asset based approaches or techniques such as Open Space Technology or Appreciative Enquiry¹.

R9: Consider the development of other special interest groups, targeting for example older people and people with disabilities.

R10: Continue the collection of internal case studies that demonstrate outcome and impact of a focus on equality and diversity, particularly involving partners. Showcase these internally and externally to inspire staff and residents.

R11: Engage with staff to help them to feel able to disclose their sexual orientation. Ask them why reporting rates where so low. This could include:

- The collection and use of data on sexual orientation for staff and tenants to address areas of concern and inequality
- Focused engagement with LGBT groups.

R12: Develop a training programme for staff and residents to get you to the 'excellent' level. Training should focus staff on:

- meeting the challenge of diversity, i.e. engagement of all communities, diverse workforce, tackling vulnerabilities, avoiding 'usual suspects' and customer care
- respecting diversity and promoting equality i.e. helping staff to question their own assumptions and opinions and be able to challenge appropriately
- Developing excellence in managing a diverse workforce; i.e. most staff/managers training such as recruitment and selection training, performance management training, customer care training should all cover aspects of equalities, diversity and human rights.
- Specialist in depth training should be available on legislation and wider issues, human rights, disability and in depth EIA and its use.

¹ See 'A glass half-full: how an asset approach can improve community health and well-being, available from the LGID website at www.local.gov.uk

3. Detailed findings

3.1 Knowing your communities and equality mapping

Strengths:

- Tower Hamlets Homes (THH) is using a range of techniques to collect equalities data about tenants and leaseholders. Examples are the Look Ahead initiative where staff from THH are sharing data appropriately with a third organisation (Look Ahead) on the profiling of their residents. Moreover, THH has invested in commissioning a market research company to undertake detailed telephone profiling, targeting gaps in its current data. This pro-active approach highlights the importance THH places on detailed customer information as the key building block to designing services around the needs of customers.
- THH uses day-to-day business processes effectively to gather equalities data. Staff are encouraged to update equalities data during day-to-day contact with tenants or when carrying out satisfaction surveys. The 'All about You' and 'Getting to know you' forms collect data against all equalities strands and a range of vulnerability indicators and are used during visits for start up tenancies and other home visits. This ensures that THH's database is continuously developed and refreshed.
- Staff are encouraged and supported in using customer information before contacting a resident. THH's housing management system includes a system of codes highlighting 24 of the most typical access, language, vulnerability and other needs and creates an alert for staff when they access resident information. This technical capability is complemented by a high profile 'Know before you Go' campaign ensures that staff check data records before making customer contact. This makes it easy for staff to make the necessary preparation prior to contacting customers and is likely to create positive peer pressures
- Socio-economic and tenant data is broken down effectively by neighbourhoods. THH has prepared neighbourhood profiles (Neighbourhood at a glance) for all 27 of its neighbourhood management areas, providing clear and succinct comparative information on a range of quantitative and qualitative data, together with a map of the housing stock and an overcrowding index. This provides useful information to inform neighbourhood plans and can help residents to target their engagement work.
- Customer data is analysed and used for a purpose. The review team found good evidence of using customer insight to inform high level business priorities and target service delivery in a number of areas. For example, in response to adverse trends in the workforce profile, THH have set a high level business objective to ensure that it will have, over time, more senior members of staff who are female and/or Asian. Operationally, customer insight has triggered the focus on and targeted programmes to support households suffering from overcrowding, financial exclusion and measures to improve satisfaction of BME tenants with repairs.

Areas for consideration:

- Equalities profiling is not consistent across all strands, with gaps in data for sexual orientation, religion and belief data, and there is a large category of 'other', including 'white minority other' which is not sufficiently broken down. Achieving high level of equalities breakdown across all strands will be a key building block in the route to excellent. Collection of leasehold data is a particular area that needs greater attention
- Equalities information for leaseholders is incomplete with the exception of gender. This restricts the understanding of and catering for specific needs of 41 per cent of customers. However, THH is aware of this gap and the Board has agreed ambitious targets for leaseholder data broken down by diversity strand which is a critical business indicator in the 2011-2012 business plan.
- Equalities data is not used consistently to inform residents and inform the provision of services for example where services are established. For example services such as talking documents, Braille, translated customer magazine are not being promoted to resident and may therefore not providing value for money.

3.2 Leadership, partnership and organisational commitment

Strengths:

- THH has been on an impressive improvement journey, moving from zero stars in 2008 to two stars in the Audit Commission inspection that took place in November last year. Improving customer focus and residents engagement was at the heart of this improvement journey with a focus on establishing the baseline of customer information, key plans and strategies and processes to mainstream equality and diversity. This provides a good foundation for the journey to excellent but will now need to transcend into the organisational and cultural DNA of the organisation.
- The CE and senior management team have an open door leadership approach and a strong focus on equality and diversity priorities. This is valued by staff and residents. Staff are positive about the opportunities that are arising from the organisational transition, for example the move to a neighbourhood structure and feel that they are able to contribute to the organisational transformation. Engaging with and empowering staff is crucial in fully embedding diversity and equality across the organisation and empowering staff to use their span of control to adjust deliver to meet tenants' specific requirements.
- The Board articulates a clear focus on equality and diversity and has adopted a target to move to the achieving level of the EFSH by January 2011 and moving to 'excellence' by March 2012. It receives regular performance monitoring reports both through the performance management committee and at Board level, outlining progress. The Board has undertaken an equality analysis of its composition which resulted in the recruitment of a Bangladeshi woman Board member.

- Following on from the Board commitment, specific equalities objectives are defined and cascade through THH's strategic business priorities, service objectives and deliverables. These include a focus on both process (eg tenants will be at the heart of the selection of the new repairs contract) and output and outcome (eg running an overcrowding pilot, improving satisfaction with the repairs service). This ensures a strategic and operational focus on specific equalities measures.
- There is a commitment to partnership working and engagement across a broad range of operational partnerships. THH is rightly taking a lead role in areas which are pertinent for its residents, for example the tackling of Anti-Social Behaviour. Asking partners for key descriptors, they characterise THH as '*proactive, customer focused, driven, developing & searching, personalised, open and willing to listen*'. This is a good basis from which to move to an excellent level where the focus will be to demonstrate outcomes of equalities and diversity work, which often will have to involve partner agencies.
- Equalities objectives are well communicated to staff using a range of tools and techniques. Examples are the characters of 'Elsie and Meena' which are used to prompt discussion about perceived and real vulnerabilities informally as well as acting as a 'visible reminder', and activities such as the 'neighbourhood twinning scheme' and the recent staff conference where staff spent half a day doing community work in 'their' neighbourhood. Staff are required to identify a personal diversity objective as part of their personal development plans. The combination of formal structures and more fluid campaigns is a good way of encouraging discussions to change staff's perception but at the same time setting specific learning objectives that can be revisited.
- THH effectively use Equalities Impact Assessments (EqIA) to review strategies and services identify and mitigate adverse impact. Actions arising from these are monitored by the performance management committee on a quarterly basis. EqIA's are leading to improvements in services, for example improved accessibility of web transactions.

Areas for consideration:

- While EqIA are prepared to a high standard, there is still a reliance on support from the Business Development Unit. For example the EqIA for the Vulnerability Strategy was lead by Service Improvement Team and needed to have more involvement from service users and external partners who should also be the key people who are part of carry out the EqIA. At policy level, EqIAs need to be used as an accompanying framework of questions to encourage staff to think about the adverse impacts of services changes rather than a form to complete. As a process it will take time to fully embed and requires team leaders and managers to promote its purpose as a questioning and assessment tool.
- THH lacks a mechanism for resident and partner scrutiny. The challenge team could not find ready mechanisms for stakeholders (other than the local authority) to challenge the work you do. Opportunities for external challenge are important to ensure honest feedback that prompt reflection and driving improvement. These

could take different shapes, for example the establishment of a resident scrutiny panel, policy scoping through the Service Improvement Groups to formulate future policy, regular reviews at partnership meetings, questionnaire-type feedback, or dedicated challenge events. The peer challenge team found the Diversity Working Group to be a good example of residents, staff and partners working together to tackle equality issues and help formulate and steer policy. It was an area of involvement that had given residents the opportunity for effective scrutiny and empowerment and going forward it could be used as a template for other areas of engagement.

- While partnership working at local level delivers added value, the review team were unsure how effective THH is engaged (or allowed to be) in the strategic debate at the 'top table'. The current changes in policy and financial constraints will require public sector organisations to work closer across 'places', considering how services can be aligned better and how costs can be reduced through better prevention and resident involvement. THH has experience in both and could provide important contributions to this discussion. Moreover, such an approach will be crucial to address some of the key strategic priorities (eg overcrowding and its implications on health, behaviour, learning, self esteem) across partners' strategic and business plans.

3.3. Customer engagement and satisfaction

Strengths:

- THH has developed a variety of formal and informal means for tenants to get involved in the business. THH have facilitated four special interest Forums (Youth, Women BME, Tenant Management Organisations, Leaseholders) and six working groups dealing with specific topics such as repairs, ASB and Decent Homes. In addition there are a range of mechanisms for engagement in service review (eg estate inspection, completing surveys) or neighbourhood working. This offers a good breadth of engagement opportunities.
- The 'getting involved register' provides a clear pathway for resident involvement. Residents can sign up to this and will be supported to find a way of becoming engaged that meets their aspirations and circumstances. The register has been profiled to ensure it reflects the community, and some 300 residents have signed up to the register. This ensures that residents who are keen to get involved can get support in doing so.
- Staff, partners and residents regard the Diversity Working Group as a positive driver for change. It has a clear remit to act as a custodian for diversity, challenge actions and act as a catalyst for change, is well supported by THH and has links into the Board, resident board and the Council. Successes are communicated to residents via the 'You said- we did' bulletin and included the introduction of tailored communication cards for operatives under the previous repairs contract. The mix of engagement, delivery and influencing can act as a good model for other engagement processes.

- Residents directly contribute to the design of some services. For example, residents have been involved in the design of the accessible customer services centre, including improved signage, lower counters for people in wheelchairs, the use of language identification cards and space for mothers to breastfeed. This ensures a sense of ownership among customers.
- There are some examples where THH is thinking creatively to maximise involvement of underrepresented groups, working with contractors. Working with Account 3, Ocean Somali Community Organisation and the Limehouse project who were commissioned to work with underrepresented BME groups to reduce rent arrears, it engaged with clients and set up a BME women's group which can now influence service provision in a more strategic way. This is a good example of working with contractors to gather customer intelligence systemically.
- Residents are positive about engaging with THH and recognise the engagement opportunities offered as a genuine desire to listen to views of residents and an openness to take on new ideas. Individuals value the opportunities for learning and personal development created through engagement, the support and encouragement to *'let us get on with it without too many limitations'* and the opportunities for practical engagement in service improvements through mystery shopping, testing out access and resident proofing literature. This creates trust and confidence among residents that their work is having an impact.

Areas for consideration:

- While there are some examples of creative thinking, THH does not yet consistently maximise all opportunities to engage with communities and creating learning opportunities for residents. For example, the challenge team heard about recent request for a shadowing opportunities not being taken up, a resident who was keen to get involved in tackling overcrowding, and staff highlighted in some cases translated letters going out to residents who have said they don't read or write - instead THH should more consistently use the pool of staff who speak a second language This misses valuable opportunities to broaden resident engagement and deliver on customer insight.
- Some residents feel frustrated by the lack of opportunity to influence decisions that directly affect their tenancy. There were strong views coming out of the resident group that housing officers were being moved for the 'sake of it' and there had been limited engagement in the plans to move to a neighbourhood management approach which had been implemented at great speed. A move to greater neighbourhood working and with it a possibility to provide different services in different neighbourhoods may be appropriate but must be understood by tenants to prevent feelings of 'inequity'. Lack of communication and an opportunity to be involved in discussing these issues could undermine trust in THH's willingness to engage on the issues that matter most to residents.
- While there are ample opportunities to engage at different levels, we found that many residents sit on several panels. While this is not a problem per se, it could create a feeling of 'the usual suspects' and undermine the intention of resident

involvement being open to all. This will be overcome by encouraging more residents to get involved. Appendix A outlines a number of suggestions from the peer team on how THH could boost resident involvement further.

- While Tower Hamlets is a 'young' borough and much is done to ensure better engagement with younger people, for example through the Youth Forum, there remains a large number of older people with a range of needs and also within a national demographic trend of an ageing population. There are no formal engagement opportunities for older people which could cause resentment among this particular group.
- There was a strong feeling among some residents that the profile of THH staff and contactors don't reflect the community. In particular the review team had comments about the absence of BME staff and staff with a disability. This can undermine trust in THH's visible commitment to diversity and equality objectives.

3.4 Responsive services and customer care

Strengths:

- THH has a comprehensive and inclusive approach to defining vulnerability. The Vulnerability Strategy aims to develop a neighbourhood based approach to working that results in all staff knowing their residents well and identifying early signs of vulnerability. This is based on theory that vulnerability is not necessarily 'static over a period of time' therefore staff need to be flexible to meet needs. This allows targeted responses to individual needs.
- Working closely with the Council, THH has effective mechanisms to deal with hate crime, including third party reporting and the 'No Place for Hate' initiative that offers tailored support to victims. THH responded quickly and publically to a recent homophobic hate campaign issuing a statement on its website and in its Open Door Newsletter, and producing a caretakers briefing advising on how to deal with inappropriate stickers. This has been noticed by partners and residents and inspires them with confidence that THH is serious about tackling hate crime.
- THH has introduced a range of innovative measures to improve access to services. For example the use of pictorial cards for people who are unable to read to pinpoint what service they need. These cards are used by housing staff as well as contractors. This is a cost effective and simple measure to overcome literacy and language problems.
- THH is ensuring that works under its significant Decent Homes Programme is designed around customer needs. Using equality data it decided to prioritise vulnerable households in its pilot. The results of the equality data informed the works and resulted in additional support, for example the provision of respite flats throughout the day, the installation of a temporary lift at one of the four sites, postponement of works in one of the sites with a high proportion of Muslim tenants until after the holy month of Ramadan. Use of equality data will help to ensure

that resident satisfaction is maximised and that programmes of work are well targeted.

- There are some examples where THH is working effectively with partners to improve lives for residents. Examples include a project with the Bromley by Bow Centre to develop resident capacity in neighbourhood management and the organisation of fire safety awareness sessions involving care takers.
- Partnership working with the council and other RSLs around tackling overcrowding is strong and overseen through the Housing Forum. Collaboration exists on a joined up review of accessible housing register cases and initiatives to manage voids and under-occupation. In the absence of a short-term solution, THH has developed an overcrowding toolkit that provides advice to affected families on how to maximise space. It also invests in carrying out repairs or adaptations that can create additional space, for example partitions. This is a good starting point to tackle one of the most pressing problems for residents in the London Borough.

Areas for consideration:

- THH has improved significantly over the last two years and has many of the key ingredients to effectively mainstream equalities and diversity. The key challenge for the next year is to embed this within the organisation and contractors and develop a robust evidence base of improvement in outcomes for all customers, including those who are vulnerable and marginalised. Completing the data mapping and further developing resident engagement are two key tasks in this, as well as ensuring that staff have the mindset and awareness, information and feel driven and empowered to adapt the way they do their job to ensure that customer needs are fully met.
- THH does not always consistently apply policy with the equalities practice. For example, we found examples where the rent arrears policy was applied without regard to the tenant being vulnerable, causing misunderstanding, stress and the involvement of other partners on behalf of the tenant. This is an example of the need for continuous conversations, training and awareness raising with staff to ensure that policies and procedures are applied within a practice (or mindset) of equalities and diversity. This will take time and requires a mix of supervision and conversations with staff as well as examples of impact staff can learn from.
- External partners acknowledge the positive direction of travel and are keen to work with THH. In responding to our question about what THH needs to do to further improve, they told us that these were: *'training, communication and embedding change'*. For example:
 - One partner referred to a case where a vulnerable tenant had not been advised on her roles and responsibilities as a tenant. She was in a flat for three days without electricity
 - Partners felt that there continued to be lack of understanding of the concept and types of vulnerabilities at housing officer level; while another mentioned

the need for more specialist training, for example in case investigations for ASB orders

- Partners acknowledged the willingness and drive of SMT to ensure that residents were getting the right level of service and the implementation of policies and processes to support this. There was uncertainty about how far these have (and have had time) to filter down across the organisation as a whole.
- There were few examples where THH is improving the lives of vulnerable residents beyond the core housing function. Examples could include working with colleges and advice services to improve tenancy sustainability; work with the PCT to target specific health programmes or employment generation schemes. The review team acknowledge that the prime focus over the last two years has been on improving performance within THH. Over time, and in the move to 'excellence' more evidence on a broader engagement in social and economic inclusion will be required.

3.5 A modern and diverse workforce

Strengths:

- Staff are supported and trained on equalities and diversity in a number of ways. The characters of 'Elsie and Meena' have been visible prompts for discussions about customers, perceived and real needs of their needs and appear to have become 'trusted friends' and vigilant reminders of the purpose of the organisation. Key messages about equality and vulnerability and 'know before you go' were conveyed through roadshows, led by the Chief Executive and the senior teams. This medium was chosen deliberately to engage staff in conversations and has proved successful as a first means of awareness raising.
- The Organisational Development team have devised an e-learning package which has been customised to reflect the particular socio-economic and demographic characteristics of Tower Hamlets. This will help learners to transfer and apply their knowledge into the work place.
- THH are committed to address the imbalance of gender and ethnicity at senior management level and are putting in place a leadership forum as an internal mechanism and meeting place for management. In addition, mentoring and coaching programmes are being designed to support the progression of women and BME staff into more senior roles. Moreover, THH participates in a Graduate Scheme with the Council that has helped six graduates with BME backgrounds to join the organisation. Over time, these initiatives will help to achieve a more representative workforce.
- Staff are clear about their objectives and feel positive about their own development and that the organisational culture allows them to take risks. They welcome the organisation's flexible working policies, including home working, compressed hours and job share and regard these as motivating to do a good job.

- The review team heard about a real change of culture compared to 2008. This was evidenced by partners, staff and residents who commented favourably on a much greater clarity of purpose and focus on customers from the new leadership team which is helping to 'create a sense of place'.
- THH is effectively evaluating not only activity but also impact of training which contributes to the design of future training programmes. Organisational Development will conduct interviews to ascertain impact after a period of months. Some positive 'stories' have included staff feeling more patient when they need to be, offering different help to customers or treating people differently. This ensures that training will be effective and provide a good return on investment.

Areas for consideration:

- Staff have low confidence of reporting on sexual orientation. The review team heard from staff that only few are reporting on their sexual orientation. This prevents meaningful analysis of workforce data. Furthermore there is a concern that if staff don't feel confident to report on sexual orientation they are unlikely to confidently ask tenants or leaseholders this question.
- While training and development have been effective to move THH to the achieving level there is a need to consider 'what next'. THH may wish to consider moving from training to dialogue and 'rich conversations' to explore areas for greater impact and responsive services using different training methods such as discussions, explorations, shadowing, study visits or other forms of organisational learning. Residents involvement as equal partners will be an important part of these conversations.
- Residents and partners have pointed out that the workforce is not representative and see this as a weakness. While this can only be addressed over time, it is important to acknowledge this as a weakness and provide output and impact of the measures that THH are adopting and the success they are having to residents and partners. This will build trust and confidence.

Examples of innovative projects and initiatives

Vulnerability strategy and Getting To Know You process

Neighbourhood at a glance profiles

Language Pointer cards and communication cards

Evaluation of learning (outputs, quality and impact)

Embedding equalities objectives into business plan

Tackling overcrowding where families are short of one room by providing space saving ideas.

Diversity Working Group

“Meena and Elsie” customer focussed Diversity Roadshows

Signpost to areas of good practice

Strategic engagement

Northwards Housing has very effective engagement practices with its strategic partners and other associated organisations at all levels. These included regular reviewing of practice and policy to ensure that emerging needs are being addressed. The organisation is recognised by its partners as playing a key role in trying to improve the lives of its tenants in North Manchester and in the community cohesion of the area. It is regarded as a leader on equalities and diversity amongst comparable organisations serving the area. Contact Tara Kelly T.Kelly@northwardshousing.co.uk

Resident involvement

Northwards Housing has a wide range of resident forums to facilitate engagement including area panels, disability focus groups, the communications forum, the high rise living forum, and the youth involvement project. It has also developed a tenants' excellence committee to carry out a more in depth scrutiny of its services. Tenants on the committee can select which areas of the service they want to examine. Members of the group have received tailored training which included equalities and diversity. NH's investment in Resident Involvement Officers has helped it engage a range of young people including those at risk of exclusion in ways which have resulted in the young people themselves leading activities. Contact Tara Kelly T.Kelly@northwardshousing.co.uk

Salix Homes customer panels enable customers to be involved in the development of EIAs, strategies, policies and business planning. The newly formed SENATE gives customers the opportunity to set their own agenda in scrutinising the work of Salix Homes. Applications were invited from customers to become Senators and as a consequence SENATE is more reflective of the diversity of the customer base. Contact Sarah Henderson Sarah.Henderson@salixhomes.org

Wolverhampton Homes has been very successful in attracting a more diverse range of tenants who become involved in engagement activities. Special interest groups have replaced tenants and residents associations leading to more young people and BAME tenants being involved. Contact Jo Patel Jo.Patel@WolverhamptonHomes.org.uk

South Tyneside Homes has made significant improvements in its engagement with tenants and residents particularly its work with young people including (NEETS) - young people

not in education, work or training. Contact Mark Johns Mark.Johns@southtynesidehomes.org.uk

Staff Training

Both Northwards Housing and Salix Homes have a range of innovative staff training. At Northwards they provide staff with theatre based training on equalities and diversity. Salix Homes uses an innovative “Eye of the Storm” video. They also have very good domestic abuse training and staff who wish to learn sign language are able to do so.

We further recommend for THH to make links with the other Excellent organisations such as South Essex Homes, Rotherham MBC, Nottingham City Council, Merseyside and West Yorkshire Fire and Rescue Services and we would be delighted to help facilitate these links.

We would further be keen for THH to engage with us in leading the national debate about effective practice.

Local Government Improvement and Development

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Appendix A - Pointers on increasing resident involvement

Ensure resident working groups reflect the community.

Use 'resident scrutiny panel' as an opportunity to up skill residents. Train more residents in effective resident participation.

Allow residents more opportunity to monitor Key performance indicators.

Train residents to become inspectors with repairs, voids and decent homes work.

Special interest groups do not have to be short term – use them to develop and mainstream residents into formal participation structure.

Large number of disabled residents – set up a focus group in partnership with Tower Hamlets to monitor DDA, Aids and Adaptations performance.

Large Bengali community – make it a priority to increase participation.

Use the Diversity Working Group success as a model for other focus groups.

Encourage residents to have direct involvement with service delivery and promote outcomes to increase empowerment.

Encourage residents to think in terms of outcomes when participating in more formal involvement structure.

Ensure resident panel is made up of residents across all neighbourhoods.

Promote cross neighbourhood working with the associations to decrease perception of 'favoured neighbourhoods'.

Form an 'over crowding' working group with members of community and residents directly affected to look at issues together.

Look to lead local housing group with other social housing providers to tackle issues in a joined up approach.

Work with partners on community events with targeted outcomes – increased participation from within LGBT/Bengali community etc

Train residents to become peer mentors – community development, I.T etc

Look to work with colleges to tackle social isolation, worklessness.

Work with children centres to encourage engagement and participation from single parents.

Look to develop code within Northgate system to flag 'female operative' may be required for example victims of domestic abuse, Muslim families.

No need to reinvent the wheel in terms of participation source local community groups and work in partnership.

Promote outcomes of mystery shopping to all residents – feed back to increase empowerment.