

How can landlords engage young residents and give them a voice?

The Social Housing White Paper set out areas that providers need to improve on to increase standards of safety and how they should empower residents to engage with them. *Inside Housing* spoke to two young residents who are actively involved in community groups to find out what they thought

Last year's Social Housing White Paper set out the areas that require more regulation with issues of safety, and in the foreword, prime minister Boris Johnson stated how fundamental it is to "give social housing tenants a voice, and ensure that it is listened to".

One group of residents that is often under-represented at meetings and engaging with their landlord is younger tenants. It is vital that landlords are able to engage with this group as they are the future tenants for years to come and will shape the community they want to live in.

Now is the time to harness what we've learned about engagement in the past year of the pandemic, says Jenny Osbourne, chief executive of Tpas, the tenant engagement membership organisation.

She says: "More than ever, we've seen housing providers and communities come together. Volunteers across estates and neighbourhoods created WhatsApp groups and Facebook groups to ensure their communities stayed safe and connected. Despite the stay-at-home message, housing services continued and so did resident engagement."

Digital engagement was a main player during COVID-19 lockdowns and will undoubtedly continue to be a huge help for landlords to get closer to their residents.

"It will naturally result in a wider demographic of residents – and younger residents are more likely able to influence how their services are shaped and delivered," says Ms Osbourne.

To look at ways that social landlords can get young residents more involved, *Inside Housing* spoke to two people who are part of groups within their communities and asked them what their landlord is doing to engage residents on issues, including the safety of their homes.

CASE STUDY 'Being included in my community makes me feel safer'

Amal, 20, is part of the Youth Independent Advisory Group at Poplar Harca

Poplar Harca is a housing association and regeneration community association in east London that manages 9,000 homes.

Each year, the organisation invests around £4m in community regeneration. This includes Spotlight – a creative youth service designed to inspire – as well as initiatives to improve health and well-being, events, networking, and the provision of affordable workspace.

Spotlight is a safe space for younger residents to be part of their community. Last year, 4,000 young people aged between 11 and 19, or up to 25 years if the person has a special need or disability, got involved in positive activity programmes intended to boost empowerment and to give young residents a voice.

Amal, 20, is part of the Youth Independent Advisory



9k
Number of
Poplar Harca
homes

4k
Young people
who got
involved in
positive activity
programmes
last year

Group, working with Tower Hamlets police, which meets every month to help them understand how to deal with community safety issues.

As a result of this engagement she is also part of a scrutiny group for the Mayor's Young Londoners Fund programmes.

"I have lived in Tower Hamlets with my family for nearly 10 years. One of my favourite things about my area is the diversity – a real mix of people from everywhere and you never see the same group of people around every day. It seems like everyone's a stranger – until you get to meet them and then you realise you're connected to them.

"I got involved with the group two years ago. It's not just about the community you're in but also learning more about the culture and religion you're from. I have Somali heritage and I am a Muslim. I want more of my friends to get involved [because] being included in my community makes me feel safer.

"I love the sessions that Spotlight do with the police. We learn about the police, what they do and how they approach certain situations to make the area safe. In turn, we help them learn how to interact with young people and how they can feel safer when the police are dealing with them. I really want to see change in how the police deals with people in my area.

"I feel more engaged with issues now and more confident to speak up – 100%. I had no self confidence at all and now if there's something I want to say, I'll speak up and I won't hold anything back. It's improved my confidence.

"Now I'm more aware of my area and I would like to get more involved on issues, and definitely on safety issues because it's about where I live and everyone here."

CASE STUDY 'I want to take life into my own hands'

Dawn, 21, is part of a new Youth Housing Forum at Sovereign

This year Sovereign launched a Youth Housing Forum, designed to help the housing association – which manages 60,000 homes in the South of England – to understand the needs and views of its young residents aged between 19 and 25.

The panel, established by Sovereign's communities team, will share its views and findings with Sovereign's resident board partnership and executive board to ensure that the organisation's future plans encompass the views of young people.

At present, the group – facilitated by the Creative Youth Network – is meeting online, with members gaining an overview of housing services, community organising, and eventually getting involved in an accredited volunteering scheme.

Dawn, 21, is an admin assistant and is about to start part-time study. She lives with her young child, Alex.



Inside Housing's Resident Safety Campaign with Aico uncovers outstanding examples of social landlords engaging with residents to raise awareness of safety issues.

"When I was younger, I would have described myself as a troublemaker. I was kicked out of school by the time I turned 16.

"Ultimately it led to me leaving home and going into supported housing. It was a wake-up call, but it was what I needed to try and sort out my own path. I met my partner and he inspired me to think about what I was good at, and I decided to go to college to study. I found out just after I finished the course, when I was 18, that I was pregnant with my son. Shortly after that we moved into our first home together, which is owned by Sovereign.

"Having my baby boy Alex changed my life. Unfortunately, his dad and I split, although we share custody equally. Having Alex focused my mind, and made me realise that, more than ever, I want the best for him.

"It's the reason I decided to get involved with Sovereign's Youth Housing Forum. I want to take life into my own hands. When I think about my future – and Alex's future – it really drives me to want to get involved. Equality matters to me.

"One of the first things I want to tackle at Sovereign is the differences in service. When I split with my partner, it was my housing officer who flagged it up to me that I would need to make changes to my benefits claim, otherwise I would lose out on money. But when I met the other members of our forum the other day, one of the other women had been struggling to find out what support she was entitled to. She'd not had access to the same standard of advice that I had.

"How do we make sure that every housing organisation is working to support each individual that lives in their homes?"

"We're going to talk with Sovereign's scrutiny group next month to find out what they do and how I might get involved. Two other members of the forum group are going to review Sovereign's fire safety information packs this month, and I'm looking forward to how I can influence things like that.

"I think that as a team of young people we can identify problems and look for solutions together." ●

60k
Number of
Sovereign
homes