

# We need to talk about building safety work

Landlords could do more to communicate the measures being carried out under the requirements of the Building Safety Bill, to engage residents and make them feel safe in their homes, a recent poll found

The government's Social Housing White Paper last November placed renewed emphasis on building safety and pledged to ensure "all homes are safe to live in", with resident voice at the heart of this transformation.

It is a message landlords heard loud and clear. Many tried to improve their communication around critical building safety works at the same time as navigating the barriers presented by COVID-19, to ensure resident engagement continued during the pandemic.

But an exclusive survey conducted by *Inside Housing*, in partnership with Aico, has shown that there is still much to be done before this transformation is complete.

For the first time, *Inside Housing* has polled both landlords and residents to understand whether communication changes implemented by organisations were actually felt among tenants, including the extent to which residents felt safe in their homes and how well they understood critical building safety issues.

A total of 256 people took part: 86% were landlords, the bulk of which were housing associations (72%). The majority of residents taking part in the survey live in housing association homes (77%), and 14% live in local authority homes.

## Digital increase

The sector's transformation around engagement has been accelerated and shaped by COVID-19, with 93% of landlords saying they had, in general, increased their digital communications to residents during the pandemic.

This largely related to increased email newsletters on building safety updates, or SMS reminders about building works and gas checks, for example. Nearly half (49%) also held online meetings for residents.

However, 40% of landlords still communicate with their residents about safety issues via post, which increased to 54% among residents who were asked the same question. One resident summed up a key problem with this method of communication, saying: "Written newsletters are out of date by the time they arrive."

Nearly half (48%) of landlords said that while they feel their organisation has clear channels of communication, it is difficult to engage some residents. For residents like Mel, who took part in the survey and has lived in a housing association property for more than 40 years, better face-to-face communication via a dedicated housing officer would help.

She says that, after a merger, her housing association cut this role, which has led to "ad hoc" communication at best. "We don't have a dedicated housing officer any more, which is an issue, because you're speaking to someone different every time. We used to have a dedicated housing officer who used to be on site regularly, and contact was a lot better."

This was echoed by another resident, who said that, over the next five years, they want their housing association to move back to having a dedicated housing officer who "manages a patch and listens to what residents require, replies to queries and makes sure that issues are dealt with. This would allow residents to email or talk to officers, and not just a call centre."

In a clear sign that the sector intends to continue improving its communication, a quarter of landlords said they are exploring the use of co-produced services with tenants, while 50% said they are already co-producing services. A smaller 13% said they are not actively looking at this.

A third also said they are either intending to launch or have recently launched (in the past one to three years) a resident scrutiny panel for evaluating communications around safety.

This transformation resonated with Gill Mooney, head of customer engagement at The Community Housing Group, who took part in the survey. She told *Inside Housing* her organisation had just launched a three-year corporate plan (2021-24), which would involve far more meaningful resident engagement and a focus on delivering excellent customer service.

"We're now looking at how we get customers involved in the organisation at different levels to allow them to influence key strategic decisions," she says.

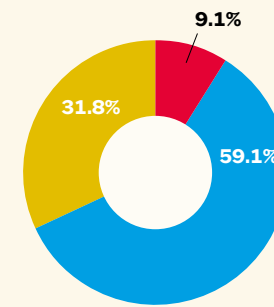
**93%**  
Landlords which increased digital comms during the pandemic

**40%**  
Landlords which communicate safety issues via post

**25%**  
Percentage of landlords which are exploring co-production of services

**64%**  
Residents who are unaware of the Building Safety Regulator

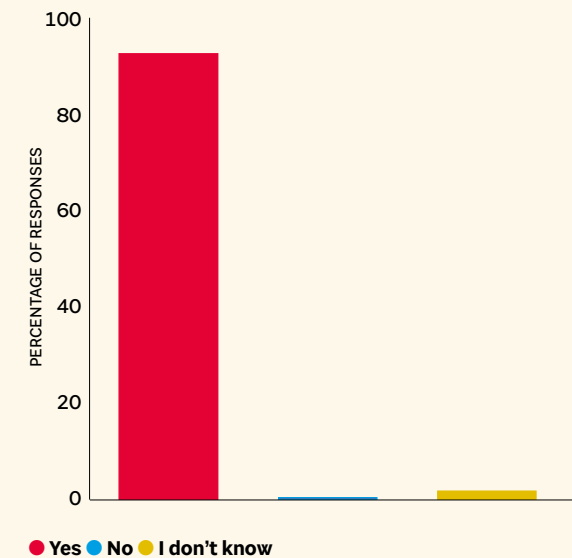
Are you aware of your landlord employing a building safety manager?



● Yes  
● No  
● I don't know

Source: *Inside Housing/Aico* survey. Figures rounded

Since the start of the pandemic, has your organisation increased its digital communications to residents?



Source: *Inside Housing/Aico* survey

She adds that communication is becoming a lot more tailored. "We've introduced a new housing management system, which enables us to tailor communication based on individual preferences. It's about culture change and there is a clear commitment from the exec and board to put residents front and centre of the organisation."

For Tina Mistry, relationships manager at Aico, this tailored response is critical to improving communication with residents.

She says: "There are a range of ways to engage with residents, but the key here is understanding customer demographics through better use of data. This will enable landlords to analyse their resident make-up, identify what means and modes are most suitable for them to engage with residents and then take them on a journey that will ultimately lead to them feeling safer in their homes."

In terms of the safety topics on which residents have received information, the bulk related to gas (59%), fire (36%) and electrical (32%).

Asked whether they feel safe in their homes, 46% said they do to a "large extent" and 36% "to some extent". Nearly 20% do not. Just over 9% said they feel safe "to a limited extent" and 9% "to a very limited extent".

The majority of residents taking part in the survey didn't know about the Building Safety Regulator and its resident scrutiny panel (64%). A further 59% said they were not aware if their landlord employs a building safety manager.

Combined, these three findings suggest landlords could do more to communicate the measures being carried out under the Building Safety Bill requirements to make residents safe in their homes.

The complexity of building safety came through as a key challenge for landlords in communicating clearly to their residents. Laura Dalton, housing services manager at Staffs Housing, says her organisation has trialled different customer versions of the fire risk assessments carried out by their housing and safety consultant to see which their residents found most beneficial.

She says: "One version was very similar to the actual full assessment, one was a fully pictorial guide and then one was in between the two. We then launched that with one scheme and sought feedback on which version [residents] found most beneficial and got the most out of and they chose the one in between."

That has been rolled out across its other blocks and has been accompanied by other forms of communications, such as an explainer video and a follow-up SMS to ensure residents have received the information, as well as tailored communication for them, such as for those residents who cannot read.

Ms Dalton adds: "Obviously, we've always done the fire risk assessments, but we probably weren't as good in the past at sharing that information with our customers. But now we're seeing the importance of getting our customers involved and being transparent more than ever." ●

*"We don't have a dedicated housing officer any more, which is an issue, because you're speaking to someone different every time"*  
Resident responding to survey