

Scrutiny Review – Engaging with hard to reach communities

The Homes for Haringey approach – a briefing note

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“People say we are hard to reach, but young black men don’t seem hard to reach when the Police want to find us”.

Reaching people is not the issue, but engaging with them is. A fairly sure way to get people to make their views known is to give them a terrible service, but of course we don’t want to do that. Otherwise, our attempts to engage people competes with the many other things they want and need to do with their time.

In Homes for Haringey, we run checks each year on the demographics of people who have worked with us more formally over the last 12 months.

Two years ago, we found that we had almost no engagement with young people. We decided to fund a year’s contract for one full time equivalent youth worker, in practice two half time posts, and we set out to find out what this section of the community thought of our services.

Initial attempts were largely failures. Young people have more interesting things to do than to commit to a long term formal group. Attempts to bribe them into discussion with pizza or to offer MP3 players in prize draws for completing surveys gave us very little real insight. Schools are not only for the children of Council tenants so it was difficult to address their issues in classes from mixed tenures.

Our workers kept saying that the national thinking is that something must be in it for young people; in other words, payment, pizza and so on. When we turned to video, we finally found something. It turns out that, given the right approaches, some young people are perfectly happy to spend some time telling us about where they live through video, with a professional film crew making it and teaching young people about the process.

On four estates we collected some really clear points about issues that affected young people there. Not all, or even most, were about housing. We were able to test the films with the wider communities to see if they agreed, and largely they did. It was then possible to take the issues out to service providers and try to provide solutions.

Neither the making of the videos nor the solutions would have been possible without the partnership and trust of colleagues from other services, especially Neighbourhoods and the Youth Service, but others too. Collectively, we can open doors to reach communities that might have been shut to any of us working alone. Here is an area for further development: if we have even quite fuzzy objectives such as 'engage young people', we can put our heads together to find out how, and the results are likely to be far better.

The biggest gap that we have demographically is in the age group between 26 and 55, which is unsurprising considering the demands on people at this time of life. They don't tend to commit to established forums, but many are quite willing to give us feedback in other ways. Recent examples have been:

- The door knocking exercise in which staff knocked on the door of every property we manage and had surveys back from 4,500 as well as picking up lot of other issues
- Our Aspirations project used 25 focus groups and a series of web-based surveys
- Analysis of complaints and satisfaction surveys have identified common problems
- Running an open day instead of a conference in 2008 increased attendance from 70 to 500 across 18 ethnicity categories compared with the previous 11
- Telephone surveys were used to check residents' views on the repairs service

Increasingly we are having to broaden our view of who our 'customers' are. Where once we thought along the lines of those with whom there is a contractual relationship (tenants and leaseholders), there is a growing understanding that estates are also inhabited by their partners, children, extended families and so on. One third of leasehold properties are now sublet to people we do not provide services to directly, and we may not even know who they are, yet they are part of those communities. The kids who hang out there may live somewhere else, yet still see our housing as their patch.

Residents' associations can be tremendously useful for communities, and we do our best to support them, including providing training and funding. Yet overall, the numbers stay relatively constant – as new ones arise, old ones die out. We have added estate advocates and we are introducing 'key leaseholders' who will scrutinise the cost of communal services. All these act as conduits through which we can gather information on local issues, though obviously residents' associations can go far beyond that.

Hopefully, it goes without saying that we offer interpreters, alternative formats, accessible venues, childcare and travel support and induction loops – all the usual methods to overcome the barriers that individuals may face.

Finally, it is all about results. They don't always come, and we don't always get it right. But the one thing that makes it worth engaging is that something happens as a result and that people know something has happened.

Engagement for the sake of ticking boxes is very short term. Once experienced by residents, they are very unlikely to want to engage ever again.