



**An Ghníomhaireacht
Tithíochta**
The Housing Agency

Housing Insights

Policy Insights Series

Developing a Tenant Engagement
Culture and Structure: The Case of
Circle VHA



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Developing a Tenant Engagement Culture and Structure

Introduction

Irish social housing providers, both Approved Housing Bodies (AHBs) and local authorities, are working to embed tenant engagement in their organisational structures. A recent example is Circle VHA’s [Tenant Communication and Engagement Strategy, 2021-2024](#). Developed in collaboration with tenants, this Strategy sets out how the organisation will communicate and develop meaningful engagement, including through establishing a Tenant Advisory Group to work in partnership with Circle VHA to improve services.

This Housing Agency Policy Insights paper describes how Circle VHA has collaborated with tenants to build a tenant engagement culture and structure. It demonstrates the benefits that can be gained – both for tenants and social housing providers – from a structural approach that embeds tenant engagement policy and practice within an organisation’s strategic vision. With the publication in 2022 by the Approved Housing Bodies Regulatory Authority (AHBRA) of new standards requiring AHBs to actively seek input from tenants and provide opportunities for engagement on service provision [AHBRA, 2022], the aim of this case study is to provide information to other social housing providers developing tenant engagement structures.

Insights



- A culture and structure of tenant engagement generates improved outcomes for tenants and staff, and is reflected in improved tenant satisfaction scores (see figure 3).**
- Structural approaches to tenant engagement enable tenants to work effectively with, and on, boards of management.**
- Resourcing is essential. Tenants assisted in recruiting a new Tenant Engagement Officer, a role which will support tenant engagement across the organisation.**

What was the issue?

Tenant engagement has numerous definitions. Many seek to capture the nature of ‘meaningful’ as opposed to ‘tokenistic’ engagement. Such definitions emphasise working together or in partnership, collaboration, co-production, two-way engagement between tenants and housing providers, and the sharing of information, ideas and power that can improve services and business objectives [Frey & Shanks, 2022; Hickman & Preece, 2019]. A recent study, funded by The Housing Agency’s Research Support Programme, defines tenant engagement as ‘the effective involvement of tenants, both directly and via representative associations, in housing management decision making, policy formation and changes, performance improvement, and community projects at local and national levels’ [Kenna & Jordan, 2022].

Tenant engagement can be:

- traditionalist**, often amounting to simply providing tenants with information;
- consumerist**, which aspires to improve services while benefitting business objectives;
- or driven by a **citizenship** approach, with the aim of empowering tenants

[Hickman & Preece, 2019].

Not only do definitions vary, so does the terminology itself – a recent study demonstrated that ‘tenant engagement’ and ‘tenant participation’ are understood interchangeably [Frey & Shanks, 2022]. For the purposes of clarity, this policy paper uses the term ‘tenant engagement’ throughout.

Tenant engagement is, therefore, a contested term that can have different meanings to describe a range of approaches to housing management. It is well developed internationally in theory and practice. The UK and numerous continental European countries have tenant engagement embedded within their housing systems, even if priorities have changed over time with, for instance, varying degrees of commitment to ‘consumerist’ and ‘citizenship’ models [Frey & Shanks, 2022].

In Ireland, housing providers have always implemented aspects of tenant engagement practice. Formal tenant engagement policies and structures have, however, been relatively lacking, with some notable exceptions [Kenna & Jordan, 2022; The Housing Unit, 2001]. Ireland’s approach to tenant engagement is, however, changing. In 2022, the Approved Housing Bodies Regulatory Authority published its standards for AHBs, which require AHBs to actively seek input from tenants and provide regular opportunities for engagement on service provision [AHBRA, 2022]. Even before these regulatory standards were introduced, Irish housing providers had begun taking structured approaches to tenant engagement by developing strategies, hiring dedicated tenant engagement staff, and implementing tenant engagement policies. Circle VHA provides an important case study of the structured implementation of such tenant engagement policies.

What was the solution?

Circle VHA recognised that their previous tenant engagement strategy, created in 2018, had little meaningful tenant input. Addressing this gap was identified as a key objective and added to Circle VHA’s Housing Management Work Plan for 2019. This was an important first step towards developing a tenant engagement structure and culture and was facilitated by Circle VHA’s senior management, including CEO and Board Chair, both of whom had years of experience working in social housing and had recognised the importance of building services around tenants’ voices and experiences.

Having identified the objective of building a tenant engagement structure and culture, Circle VHA’s management then met with representatives from Supporting Communities, Northern Ireland’s independent tenant and community engagement champion, in 2019. This meeting generated a collaborative relationship, with Supporting Communities providing independent guidance on developing and implementing a tenant engagement structure and strategy.

An incremental approach was adopted, with a number of initiatives including:

1. Planning, Consultation and Training;
2. Structural Changes: Creating a Tenant Advisory Group;
3. Drafting a Tenant Engagement Strategy; and
4. Resourcing: Hiring a Tenant Engagement Office.

Each of these initiatives will now be discussed in turn.

1. Planning, Consultation and Training

As a first step, a work plan was developed which included specific objectives including:

- Forming a Tenant Steering Group;
- Conducting extensive training and consultation with Circle VHA's tenants and staff;
- Developing and publishing a tenant engagement strategy for 2020-2024;
- Structural changes within Circle VHA to facilitate tenant engagement.

This work plan, developed in late 2019, was delayed by the COVID 19 pandemic, and face-to-face training events and consultation meetings were moved online. Despite this, significant achievements were made with many of the planned activities flourishing online. In particular, Supporting Communities delivered tenant engagement awareness and training sessions for staff and tenants. This training emphasised the importance of tenant engagement as an approach which, if implemented across the organisation, can deliver real results.

To drive and coordinate tenant involvement, a Tenant Steering Group was established in August 2020, meeting on four occasions that year and twice in March 2021. Membership was open to all tenants, and fluctuated between six and eleven, who were invited to participate via text, letter, or in person by Tenancy Services Officers. All meetings were independently chaired by Supporting Communities and, when requested, Circle VHA's CEO, Chair, and Senior Management attended to answer questions and discuss the organisation's corporate strategy and structure. The Steering Group achieved numerous outcomes in 2021, including:

- Redesigning the new Tenant Approved Logo, used on all tenant-related documents approved by tenants themselves [See Figure 1];
- Editing, proofing, and approving the new Tenant Newsletter and the new Tenant Handbook;
- Reviewing the existing Tenant Engagement Strategy to set parameters for a more comprehensive redrafting.

The Steering Group's priority for 2021 was, however, to develop a code of conduct and terms of reference for a new Tenant Advisory Group which would supersede the Steering Group, and be designed to embed tenant engagement permanently within Circle VHA's structure. Both were drafted in time to be reviewed and approved by the Tenant Advisory Group upon its inaugural meeting in April 2021.

Figure 1: Circle VHA's Tenant Approved Logo



2. Structural Changes: Creation of Tenant Advisory Group

The Tenant Advisory Group was established in April 2021, and superseded the Steering Group. It began with 10 members, a number which has remained stable with slight fluctuations. The Tenant Advisory Group's purpose is to work in partnership with Circle VHA to improve service delivery by providing feedback; to keep tenants informed; and to oversee tenant-related policies, procedures, and publications. It is an independent body, chaired by Supporting Communities, and supported by Circle VHA's Tenant Engagement Officer. A call for tenants to become involved was made via the Tenant Newsletter, website, online information sessions and text message. Members of the former Steering Group remained involved and brought experience, while the Tenant Advisory Group also received formal training on Circle VHA's structures, finances and regulation, as well as training in good governance, effective meetings, and the role of a chairperson.

The Tenant Advisory Group has a formal position within Circle VHA's structure, and regularly meets with management, board, Chair and CEO. The Tenant Advisory Group receives abbreviated minutes of Board meetings (having requested the abbreviated version itself), and the Tenant Advisory Group minutes are supplied to the Board in turn. Any questions or requests from either the Tenant Advisory Group or the Board are incorporated into these papers. The Tenant Advisory Group also requested that Circle VHA's Tenant Engagement Officer attend and support meetings, while management, CEO, and Chair are periodically invited to meetings to present papers, feedback, or responses to questions. The Customer Service and Repairs Manager has, for instance, reported on tenant satisfaction surveys; while the Finance Manager has reported and explained financial statements.

The establishment of the Tenant Advisory Group aimed to place tenant engagement at the heart of Circle VHA's organisation and operations. Participation does, however, require a time commitment that is unsuitable to some. Several other methods of structural engagement were, therefore, created, to allow as many tenants as possible to become involved. These include:

- Reviewing and editing newsletters;
- Membership of the 'Shadow Group', which reviews and approves Circle VHA policies; and
- The IT Group, which is overseeing the creation of a new Tenant App.

3. Drafting a Tenant Engagement Strategy

One of the Tenant Advisory Group’s major objectives for 2021 was producing a revised Tenant Communication and Engagement Strategy for Board approval. The Tenant Advisory Group wrote this strategy, with assistance from Supporting Communities. Circle VHA staff were available during the process to answer questions, assist with administration, and laying out the document. Fundamentally, however, this strategy was written by tenants. The Strategy was launched in October 2021. The [Tenant Communication and Engagement Strategy](#) provides a menu of engagement opportunities to be developed over the period 2021-2024. These options, outlined in Figure 2, allow tenants different opportunities and levels of involvement.

Figure 2: Menu of Engagement Opportunities



Source: Circle VHA Tenant Communication and Engagement Strategy 2021-2024

To monitor progress and ensure these options are delivered, the *Tenant Communication and Engagement Strategy* outlines a detailed Action Plan covering 30 individual items, grouped under eight headings, ranging from making concrete foundations for the engagement structure, to considering good governance and putting in place ways to improve communications with all tenants. Of the items covered in the Action Plan, however, among the most important are those related to the provision of sufficient resources to ensure meaningful engagement.

4. Resourcing: Hiring a Tenant Engagement Officer

Sufficient resourcing was required from the very beginning, especially due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This required significant investment in IT resources, including Zoom licences, devices for tenants on the Steering Group, IT training, new phone and text messaging services, and website improvements.

Resourcing was also required to roll out the training programme to both tenants and staff. This was an extensive programme offered to all staff, not just those directly involved with tenants,

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and was key to Circle VHA's objective of putting tenant engagement at the heart of the organisation.

One of the most significant resourcing commitments was the decision to hire a dedicated Tenant Engagement Officer. The Tenant Advisory Group requested that a staff member be provided to support their work, and this was included in the Tenant Engagement Strategy. A Tenant Engagement Officer was recruited in August 2021 at Grade 3, equivalent to Circle VHA's Tenancy Services Officer (or Housing Officer in other organisations). The Tenant Advisory Group was closely involved in the hiring. Two Tenant Advisory Group members received recruitment and interview training, sat on all first and second round interviews, and helped determine who should be offered the role. According to the successful candidate, this "highlighted that Circle VHA was very serious about a tenant first approach and understood that the tenant engagement officer would be working alongside tenants, in a uniformed approach".

These activities required a budget, which was proposed to the finance director and Board and approved. In Circle VHA, Tenant Engagement now has its own budget line.

What were the outcomes?

Circle VHA has created an organisation-wide approach to tenant engagement with numerous measurable outcomes. These are categorised under the twin objectives of building a tenant engagement structure and building a tenant engagement culture. Although significant achievements have been made, Circle VHA is at the beginning of a longer tenant engagement journey, with future outcomes identified, the most ambitious being to have tenant representation on Circle VHA's Board.

Tenant Engagement Structure

A tenant engagement structure, centred on the Tenant Advisory Group, is now embedded in Circle VHA's organisation. The Tenant Advisory Group's relationship with the Board and management is formalised, and communications channels remain open. The Tenant Engagement and Communication Strategy, along with its Action Plan, provide a roadmap for further embedding tenant engagement structures, and a means of measuring achievements.

The Action Plan outlines key deliverables. The most impactful have already been discussed, including the establishment of the Tenant Advisory Group, launching the Tenant Engagement Strategy, and forming further opportunities for engagement, including the IT Focus Group and the Shadow Group to review and approve policies. Numbers of tenants on all groups are to be expanded in 2022. These structural changes have generated further outcomes including the overhaul of Circle VHA's complaints policy, which was reviewed and approved by the Shadow Group, and the implementation of enhanced tenant satisfaction surveys, which are now undertaken quarterly rather than annually with results presented to the Tenant Advisory Group. Progress towards delivering the Action Plan is reported to a Strategic Purpose Group Committee and to the Board. In total, the Action Plan for 2021 listed 31 targets, and had an excellent completion rate of 90.3%, with 28 targets fully met and three partially met.

The Action Plan outlined in the Tenant Engagement Strategy has been followed up by a subsequent Action Plan for 2022, which outlines 40 key actions. These focus on the

opportunities for engagement outlined in Figure 2, which are yet to be delivered. Several KPIs have also been agreed, including having 2.5% of tenants involved with the Tenant Advisory Group by the final quarter of 2022, and agreeing a training proposal to support tenant participation on Circle VHA's board.

All this demonstrates that tenant engagement has a concrete and measurable place within Circle VHA's structure. For Circle VHA, tenant engagement has gone beyond writing a strategy or making verbal commitments – one of its major outcomes has been putting a structure in place to promote engagement, report on progress, provide accountability and monitor delays.

Tenant Engagement Culture

The development of a tenant engagement structure supports a broader outcome – developing a tenant engagement culture. There are numerous indicators of the development of a tenant engagement culture within Circle VHA, which will now be discussed in turn.

Delivery of organisation-wide training:

Organisation-wide training, delivered by Supporting Communities, ensures that all staff, not only those interacting with tenants, are familiar with Circle VHA's approach to tenant engagement. In 2020, training was delivered to all staff – front line, corporate services, management, executive and CEO, with a 93% attendance rate. In December 2021, 90% of staff completed refresher training, while tenant engagement training is now included in the induction programme for all new recruits.

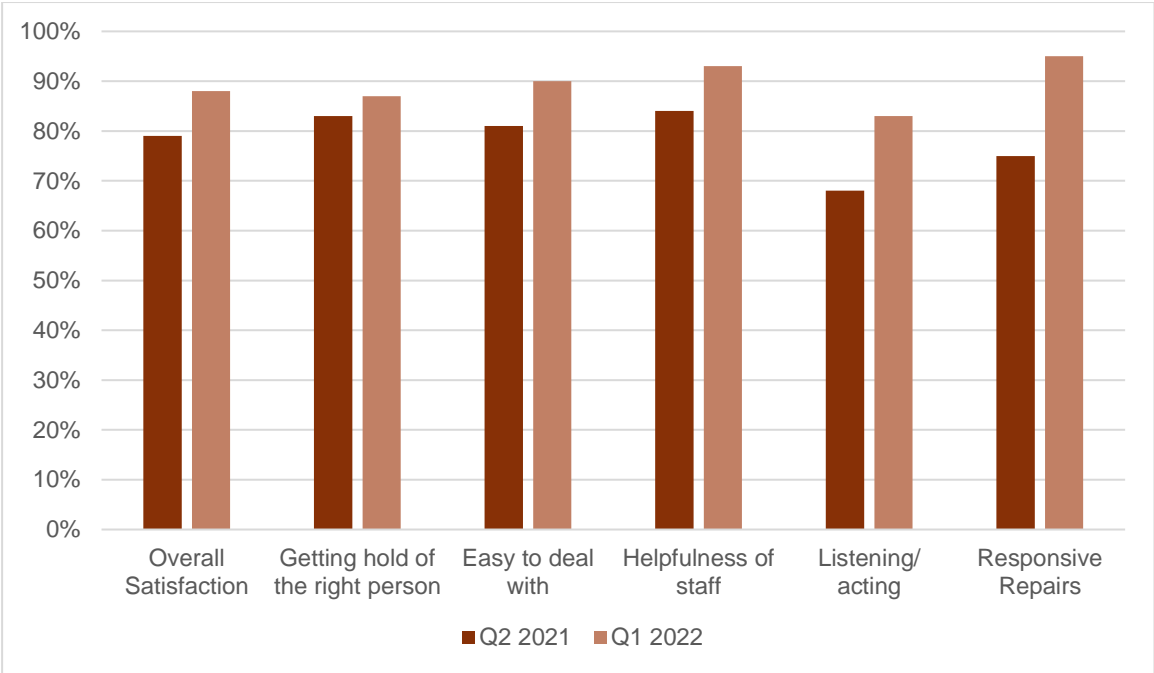
Improved Communication Channels:

Although the introduction of a dedicated Tenant App was delayed from 2021 to 2022, the resources committed to tenant engagement have allowed other improvements to communications, including delivering a new phone system and opening more lines, publishing a new tenant newsletter, and making regular calls to tenants to get involved in the Tenant Advisory Group.

Increased Satisfaction Scores:

A further measure of a strong tenant engagement culture is found in Circle VHA's tenant satisfaction scores. As Figure 3 demonstrates, overall satisfaction levels increased by almost ten percent between Q2 2021 and Q1 2022 – the period during which the tenant engagement strategy was introduced. Although these improvements cannot be exclusively attributed to the Tenant Engagement Strategy, they demonstrate that Circle VHA's tenants feel the organisation is more responsive, more engaged, and more likely to listen to their issues – all key objectives of a tenant engagement culture. This is especially true of Circle VHA's scores in respect of 'Listening and Acting' (an increase from 68% to 83%) and 'Responsive Repairs' (an increase from 75% to 95%).

Figure 3 Circle VHA Tenant Satisfaction Scores, Percentages responding ‘Very Satisfied’ or ‘Fairly Satisfied’ to selected statements, Q2 2021 – Q1 2022



Tenants as ambassadors

The views of tenants, especially those active in the Tenant Advisory Group and wider tenant engagement activities, should also be used to assess the outcomes of Circle VHA’s tenant engagement structure and culture. Several who have been involved in the Tenant Advisory Group have positioned themselves as ambassadors for the approach taken, and spoken about their experiences in other settings, including the tenant forums of other AHBs. Two tenants were nominated for a Housing Hero award at the CIH All-Ireland Housing Awards for their work in this area. In this way, tenants themselves are helping to drive the process. According to one member of the Tenant Advisory Group, although they originally “had not got a clue” what tenant engagement was about, as they eventually “got to learn more about it” they came to “enjoy the meetings, meeting other tenants, staff from Circle” but, most importantly, “having a say at these meetings, and [knowing that] what was being said was being noted”.

Aims for the Future: Tenants on Board

Circle VHA’s Tenant Engagement Strategy extends to 2024 and includes several goals, one of the most notable is implementing a process to enable tenant representation on the Board.

The potential for a tenant to join the Board was considered early on. It was discussed by the Board, where issues were identified around conflicts of interest. To address these, advice was sought from Circle VHA’s company solicitor and the Charities Regulator. They clarified that a tenant joining the Board should understand they are not doing so as a representative of other tenants, but to provide their individual perspective and judgement. Although a tenant sitting on the Board could not act as a representative of other tenants, they could provide additional legitimacy and accountability to the Board in tenants’ eyes, by demonstrating their experiences and interests are considered in decision-making. Both the company solicitor and the Charities

Regulator informed that providing there was a robust Conflicts of Interest Policy and that any relevant tenant was fully aware of their duties and responsibilities, there should be no impediment to a tenant joining the Board. A pathway is therefore open for a tenant to join the Board by 2024.

Lessons learned

This case study demonstrates that a structure and culture of tenant engagement can be developed in a meaningful and measurable way with significant benefits for both tenants and housing providers. Tenants' voices can be included in the structure of housing organisations, and this has impacts on service delivery and organisational culture, with a greater emphasis on two-way participation, equality, and empowerment.

Lessons for AHBs or Local Authorities seeking to improve tenant engagement include:

1. *The support of senior management and board from the outset is essential:* Effective tenant engagement emerges from the interaction of bottom-up activism and top-down leadership. CEO and Board support is essential to success by ensuring that engagement is embedded within organisation-wide processes.
2. *Not to rely solely on existing staff and structures:* The process requires an acknowledgement that new structures and staff roles may be required to develop meaningful tenant engagement.
3. *Embrace technology and online resources:* Covid originally delayed plans, but the move online ultimately allowed more accessibility. Website improvements and the new tenant app can provide more emphasis to engagement.
4. *Continued tenant recruitment:* To ensure tenant engagement structures maintain momentum, ongoing recruitment is key. The diversity and representativeness of tenant groups should be considered, and their role clearly defined. Ensuring they are neither too formal nor informal will maximise recruitment.
5. *Support tenants to become leaders for the project:* This includes allowing tenants to become spokespeople for the project. But it also means ensuring the entire process, in particular the structural changes, are tenant-led. Tenants should write the strategy, set goals, and be involved in monitoring implementation.
6. *Building effective engagement takes time:* It is important to adopt an incremental approach and to offer a menu of opportunities that is a) realistic and achievable within defined timeframes, b) what tenants want, and c) can be resourced.
7. *Meaningful tenant engagement requires sufficient resourcing:* Objectives must be supported by a realistic budget. This can include a dedicated Tenant Engagement officer, but also resourcing to embed engagement across the whole organisation. This includes ongoing training, events budgets, IT equipment, and communications.
8. *The involvement of an outside, independent organisation:* This provided essential advice, expertise, and training. Most importantly, it also brought independence, and moderated between tenants and Circle VHA. Independent oversight helped build trust between all parties, and furthered the collaborative approach.

Figure 4: Summer Community Event for Circle VHA tenant and neighbours at Stockingwell Wood, 23 August 2022



References and Further Reading

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