

Opportunities for Empowerment: A skills-building Think Tank for residents and support workers

A 24-hour training event for Together Housing Residents

1. Introduction

On the 2-3rd February 2022, 19 Together Housing residents and 6 members of their staff met at Trafford Hall for a 24-hour training event led by Tim Morton and organised by the Housing Plus Academy. The event aimed to help residents develop skills to become more active and involved. Many of the participants had become involved in residents groups during the pandemic and this was the first time they were meeting face to face.

The residents who attended came from lots of different groups:

- Scrutiny groups
- Local volunteers
- Homeownership group
- Fire safety group
- ASB group
- Disabled & Allies Resident Engagement group
- Customer voice
- Environmental services
- Complaint's forum
- Diverse Residents group
- Ombudsmen Panel

2. Trafford Hall

The event was held at Trafford Hall, home to the National Communities Resource Centre (NCRC). Trafford Hall is a 250-year-old listed building, with a rebuilt timber-frame, carbon-neutral training block, 'The Stable', and 42 eco-chalet bedrooms with turf roofs, timber walkways and maximum insulation. The Hall is a model of energy-saving and sustainable building. It relies on 100% renewable energy for heating and

light, with completely organic grounds and gardens, and has halved its energy use since 2010. Other sustainable features include using low-energy materials such as pulped recycled newspaper for insulation, turf roofs, and retaining and reusing existing building materials to restore the buildings. Trafford Hall offers wheelchair accessible meeting space and accommodation. It has 7 main meeting rooms and 52 ensuite bedrooms.

3. What happened at the event?

The event was broken up into 6 sessions. Each session was focused on developing a new skill and was very participative, led by participants sharing their ideas and experience.

Session 1- Icebreaker Exercise

Skills: Interviewing and speaking

- Join up with a partner you do not know well, talk to them about yourself, try and share an interesting fact
- Feedback to the whole group something you have learnt about your partner

Session 2- After Dinner Debate "Can residents hold landlords to account?": For and Against

Skills: Presentation and communication skills

<p>For:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social landlords exist to provide homes for us • Scrutiny of landlord actions is an essential part of resident engagement • Scrutiny really does make a difference- we have changed how gas inspections are carried out • If we work together, we have the potential to have a big influence 	<p>Against:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The chief executive will always have the last say. There is nothing we can do to change their minds • We can't make staff listen if they don't want to • Landlords say they will listen, but never take action
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<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The white paper is increasing power for residents and landlords will have to change • We asked Together Housing for a Community Café and they supported us to set it up • Together Housing benefit from us being involved- we are the one who are experts in our homes and communities. • If you don't think anyone at Together is listening you can go to the Housing Ombudsmen • Trafford Hall helps us become empowered tenants and make a difference. • As long as you keep persisting things do change • You need to learn to negotiate- if they don't agree at first offer another solution • Together Housing do make changes but they need to be better at communicating things to residents and they need to avoid housing jargon. They are currently re-writing the complaints procedure to make it more user friendly 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We don't know who is responsible for different things, so how can we know the right person to ask. • Staff aren't always open and honest, you think you know what's happening but you don't • When you have a problem you just get passed from pillar to post and nothing ever changes • If the system requires you to keep persisting- the system is broken • When we became Together Housing we were promised that every resident would have the same service, but we were never given a timescale for when that would happen.
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For: 23. Maybe: 1. Against: 1

Session 3- Tour of Trafford Hall grounds and buildings

Skills: Listening and observation

- Tour of Trafford Halls energy saving measures to help protect the environment, take notes along the tour
- Quiz on information from the tour

All the participants engaged well in the task and were able to recall the information from the tour. It was useful for residents to ask questions along the tour to check they understood what was being explained.

Session 4- Community Action: What can residents do within their communities?

Skills: Note taking skills for case studies, examples and ideas

- Group discussion about different community action projects participants have been involved in
- Fill out "experience sheets" outlining projects covering:
 - Name of project:
 - What does the project do?
 - Who does the project help?
 - Who is the project organised by?
 - How is the project funded?
 - What was the outcome of the project?

Example projects

- Two ladies who are experienced in organising community groups are helping set up a multi-cultural community centre which can be used by members of different faith groups and communities. The idea came from someone who had no experience of community work and he approached the ladies asking for help.
- A group targeting asylum seekers who have experienced trauma aims to bring people together and teach them skills such as sewing. This helps them build relationships with one another and develop a support system. They find people are more likely to talk about their experiences if they are engaging with an activity. It also helps them practice their English. Once the course is finished they link them up to the local college so they can access further training.

- One group spoke to the local council about providing gym sessions for £2 a week, they then applied to Big Lottery Funding so they were able to offer free gym sessions for members of the local community.
- Together Housing received funding to set up a “Find Your Voice” singing class. At the end of the project the 9 members enjoyed it so much they decided to keep attending the group and they now have funding from “Stay well” so every two weeks a professional singer comes and gives the group a lesson. They find the group is a very good support for people suffering with mental health issues and loneliness.
- Community sweet shop- a sweet shop in someone’s back garden where the children can come and buy sweets after school. They then use the money to buy the local children Christmas and birthday presents. The children also get the opportunity to meet each other at the shop.
- One group has received funding to arrange for a holistic therapist to come to the community room each week. They are able to offer a 6 week programme of 20 minute sessions. Residents who have participated are finding the programme really useful.
- “Free to a good home table”- a table in the community room where people leave things they no longer need and people can take free of charge
- Learning to Drive scheme- funding for young people to have driving lessons, they had to apply and say why they needed to be able to drive and how it would help them.

Conversation

- A lot of groups have lost momentum over COVID. It is important these groups are supported to get going again.
- COVID has taught us that online engagement can be really useful. Going forward we should have a hybrid model so as many people as possible can engage in groups.
- Some people don’t want to be highly involved, social media and online surveys can be useful for these people
- Together Housing can support groups to become self sufficient

Session 5- Learning to Negotiate

Skills: Negotiation and listening skills and Understanding other perspectives

- Residents and staff members' divided into different rooms. Both have to come up with their top priorities.
- In small groups residents explain their top priorities to a staff member, the staff member then explains what it is possible for the landlords to change and through negotiation and discussion they come to a solution.

Table 1- Communication

Residents feel communication between Together and residents has improved but there is still room for improvements, particularly with receiving the right information about resident meetings. The staff member felt we needed a clear definition of what was meant by communication, and that there have been a lot of new groups set up in the last 12 months which may have led to delays in getting the right information out before meetings. However, they are trying to become more organised by getting a years' worth of meetings arranged in the calendar, and they are always open to hear how they can improve more. Together Housing are now thinking about moving times of meetings to suit as many residents as possible. They are also trying to put information out in a number of formats to suit a range of resident needs.

Table 2- A well maintained home

The resident's top priority is for a well maintained safe home, they feel this is sometimes not achieved. The staff member explained that there have been delays over COVID and they try their best to ensure this information is shared with residents. As a result of a scrutiny survey they now give all new residents a leaflet with details of the neighbourhood team so they know who to contact with a problem. They are also going to start doing more local drop ins so residents have more opportunities to meet the team and report any problems

Table 3- Repairs

The residents felt their top priority was with how repairs are dealt with, they sometimes have contractors turning up without the correct part and having to leave, with residents not knowing when they will come back. They also felt some residents didn't know how to report a repair. The staff member explained that all the information was on the website and in newsletters, and they are trying to find new ways to communicate with people who don't access these channels. The staff member explained that sometimes the way in which a repair is reported is a bit vague which can mean the contractor doesn't have the right equipment to fix it. The staff member also explained that COVID had caused some delays. Together have recently introduced a new repairs pledge, to ensure repairs are carried out in the best way and contractors clean up properly after a job.

Table 4- Sustainable community

Tables 4's priority was to have an environment where residents feel safe and where services are accountable to residents. The staff member explained that we have a service standard to try and ensure residents need are met, but if residents are experiencing any problems, they should report them. Together Housing are also going to work with other local services to try meet residents' needs.

Table 5- Parking for disabled residents

Table 5 felt there was not enough protected parking for disabled residents on the estates, and sometimes disabled residents were forced to park far away from their homes. The staff member said the first solution would be to talk to your local neighbourhood officer to see if they could manage the situation. Together Housing is working to understand the needs of different residents and to adapt the estates accordingly. However you have to consider the issue of cost and whether adding the extra spaces would change the service charge.

Tips for good negotiation

At the end of the session we reflected on which negotiations had worked well and how best to carry out a discussion about a key issues to come to a useful outcome:

- Speak calmly and quietly, don't raise your voice when explaining your point
- Take time to clarify points. If you don't understand what the other person is saying ask them to explain in more detail
- Work as a team, don't have one person just doing all the talking, and listen to what everyone is saying.
- Don't assume you know someone's life experiences or point of view, always listen to what others are saying.

Session 6- How can participants take forward what they have learnt?

Skills: Action Planning

For the final session residents had to reflect on what they had learnt to come up with an action plan on something they wanted to do or change within their own communities. They had to think about the following:

- *What key issue do you want to tackle?*
- *What resources do you need?*
- *Identify the individuals who will be involved. Who will do what?*
- *What skills will you use during your project and when? e.g. presentation skills, communication, active listening, note-taking*
- *Prepare a brief timetable for action:*
- *What targets can you put in place to measure the success of your project?*

Projects included:

- Setting up a new playground near a high rise block with little access to outdoor space
- Better parking schemes for disabled residents
- Helping get residents online
- Setting up communal WIFI in blocks of flats and running digital inclusion sessions
- Improving the communal area in a block of flats.
- Setting up a gardening scheme for people that can't maintain their own gardens
- Helping tackle ASB linked to racism

4. Summary of feedback

At the end of the session all participants were asked to complete a feedback form.

Overall, the feedback was extremely positive.

1. Has the course given you new ideas

Yes- 21, No- 0

- *Community friends project from Julie*
- *Join the new development group*
- *Thoughts about becoming more eco-friendly*
- *At least somebody cares for us*
- *Maybe raise a project for the scrutiny panels*
- *Ask Together to support us in obtaining a new play area*
- *Helped me get more involved and improved my confidence*
- *To listen more*
- *New funding sources*
- *Accessing potential funding streams whose details have been given at this event*
- *I was pleased to learn existing resources and structures to help in case of need.*
- *Wi-Fi installation schemes*
- *Clarifying points before moving on*
- *I am going to go forwards on renewing the grounds of our park area*

2. Has the course encouraged you to take forward an existing area?

Yes- 18, No-3

- *How to improve communication between Together and tenants*
- *CIH training and qualifications*
- *General negotiation skills*
- *To get a training scheme to get residents more involved*
- *To continue doing what we are already doing, there are so many just like us making community efforts continue*
- *It was my first face to face meeting. I was just getting to know the organisation*
- *Yes- just need the support from Together*
- *Roll out youth activities at estate level*
- *Driving school provisions for young people. Gaining ideas for young people to get involved*
- *Support to maintain gardens and tackle anti-social behaviour*
- *Operation WIFI- how to, resources, security*
- *I am hoping to do the refurb of our park area*

3. What did you think about the way the information was put across?

Everyone thought the information had been put across well, this included:

"It was clear, all questions answered. Clarification was given and discussion well managed"

"Very well- good info pack- good level of information"

"It was easily presented with a lot of emphasis on interaction"

4. Was there anything you wanted from the event that you didn't get?

Yes- 18 No-3

The only comment on something they would have liked that the event didn't include was to have more discussion pre and post-debate

5. How could the event have been improved?

The majority of participants thought nothing could be improved about the event:

"It couldn't. Tim Morton as exceptional in every way as ever"

"Very enjoyable event nothing needed improving"

Only 6 people thought that anything could be improved about the event this included:

"Coffee available all the time but just in break"

"We could have had more breakout sessions, rather than sitting in the room all morning".

"Staying on track and not getting involved with personal issues"

"Event excellent, food preparation- better hygiene needed"

"Tables in dining room were very close together and uncomfortable for adults to sit in the room close to each other"

"Longer time, maybe full afternoon on the 1st day"

5. Conclusion

Overall, the event was very successful all participants engaged well in all the sessions, and feedback was extremely positive, with all residents leaving with new ideas, and the majority planning on taking forward a new idea. It worked really well having a mixture of staff and residents, especially in the negotiation session. We will take on board the feedback for improvement and make adaptations to future programmes.