Digital engagement: A study of tenants

Deliver fit-for-purpose, strategic plans for long-term digital engagement

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Introduction

TIS is committed to supporting tenants and housing organisations across Scotland to work together and connect, to develop effective housing, community development, and engagement practices – and in ways that maximise reach and overcome barriers.

Digital resources are imperative to this work, and to this end, the TIS team are committed to providing the best possible advice, support, and training services across the social rented sector to develop Digital Engagement Strategies.

COVID-19 restrictions have significantly changed the way that housing organisations, and tenant, resident, and community groups operate. Traditional methods to engage and participate are now limited and have resulted in a great demand for online support and digital guidance to ensure we continue to meet the needs of our diverse and flourishing communities.

Many have acted quickly, recognising the importance of bridging the gap at this time. And, many are making the most of this unique opportunity to extend reach and capture the voice of individuals who historically, are yet to become involved in engagement and participation activities.

Often, the main concerns for housing organisations, and tenant, resident, and community groups surrounding digital engagements are: a willingness to embrace new approaches; access; skill set; resources; and support.

A study of tenants and digital engagement

This study was undertaken to find out more and explore how TIS can support organisations to deliver fit-for-purpose, strategic plans for long-term digital engagement.

To capture this data, TIS, circulated an online survey to all members via email and social media – encouraging any tenant within the social rented sector to complete and share. **Respondents were equally split between local authority and registered social landlords - and additionally 50% of local authority regions were represented across all responses**.

Furthermore, a focus group of survey respondents were invited to take part in an online video call to record their views and explore issues in greater detail. Our findings suggest a very definite appetite for increased digital engagement amongst tenants.

A common thread amongst respondents suggest that tenants are keen to lead the way via peer support and embrace new technologies to keep existing engagement and participation activities on track.

Importantly, tenants also recognise the benefits these approaches present for expanding reach and capturing the input of tenants, and staff who might previously have found the location, timing, and format of traditional face-to-face meetings a barrier to their involvement.

53%
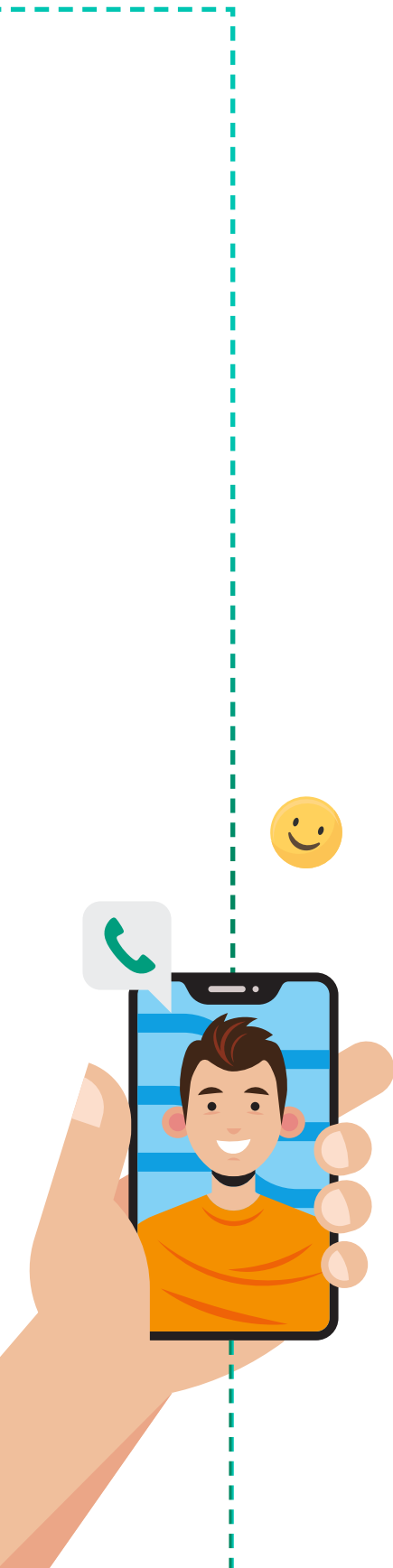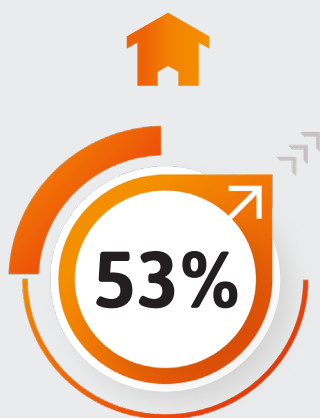
*of survey respondents
are aged under 65*

Participant profile

Interestingly, **53%**, and the majority of survey respondents were aged under 65. **32%** were between the ages of 50-64, and **21%** were between the ages of 26-49.

No respondents that took part in the survey or focus group were between the ages of 16-25.

Respondents were equally split between local authority and registered social landlords. Positively, **28%** of the 32 local authorities operating in a landlord capacity in Scotland, were represented through the survey.

And, additionally **50%** of local authority regions were represented across all responses.
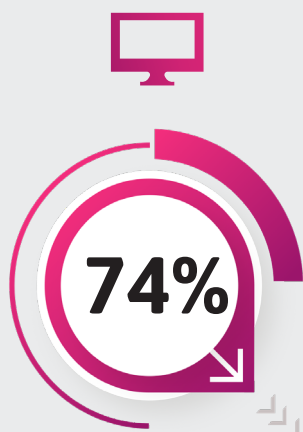
Access to devices and platforms

74% of tenants reported having access to a computer;

67% of tenants reported having access to a mobile smartphone;

62% of tenants reported having access to a tablet device;

86% of tenants reported using Facebook;

37% of tenants reported using YouTube;

25% of tenants reported using Twitter; and

18% of tenants reported using LinkedIn.

Of the **22%** to specify using '*other*' social media platforms, the majority reported using WhatsApp.

74%

*reported having access
to a computer*

The focus group explored access and platforms in more detail.

Participants expressed that they view housing organisations to have a responsibility in providing training, resources, and technology to individuals who want to become involved in engagement and participation activities.

Furthermore, the group suggested that there should be '*ground work*' in place in terms of providing equipment to existing tenant groups and building from there.

The group also stressed that equipment must be fit-for-purpose and user friendly – for example, the small screen of a smart phone is difficult to navigate through and take part in a video call of more than 4 people.

86%

*of survey respondents
reported using Facebook*

Online platforms that are '*no frills*' are ideal. Useful platforms identified by the group included Zoom, Webex, and Basecamp.

Skills and knowledge

Overall, question respondents indicated that they were **fairly confident** in their current digital skills. Using a scale of 1-10, with 1 being not experienced at all and 10 being very experienced, **43%** of respondents scored themselves between 5 and 7, and a further **36%** scored 8 or higher.

Encouragingly, **57%** of question respondents reported having taken part in a video call. However, the focus group participants were largely '*first-time users*' with 9 out of 13 participants reporting that the session was the first time that they had used Zoom, or anything like its kind.

Group participants recognised that **online platforms are a great tool to tackle isolation** and, encouragingly, indicated that they will likely take the skills learned from the focus group into their personal lives to contact families/friends in ways they have never done before.

57%

of survey respondents have taken part in a video call
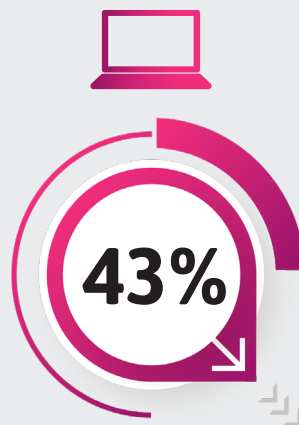
Access to support

A majority of question respondents, **66%**, stated they do not have the support within their household to access digital/online communication platforms if needed.

71% of question respondents do not think their landlord could provide support to increase tenants' digital skill set, which in turn would improve direct communication between them and their landlord. This view was also reinforced by focus group participants, and many expressed the opinion that landlords are not equipped to provide solutions throughout a crisis period.

Furthermore, group participants indicated that housing organisations could develop strategies to get staff to 'buy in' digitally. Although participants also recognised that housing organisations and tenants are simultaneously '***finding their feet***' with digital.

There was a suggestion that housing organisations could offer '*support packs*' to aid tenants to get online. Further, these support packs could be useful for peer-to-peer learning. For example, a selected group of digitally experienced tenants could take on the role of '***digital gurus***' and aid other tenants to get online.

Participants also identified a hesitation for some tenants to move forward digitally. In their experience, some individuals lack basic digital knowledge which in turn creates an access barrier. **However once a little is learned about the platforms available and there functionality, many people become encouraged to try**.

Those who are currently involved in registered tenant organisations or scrutiny groups indicated that they are keen to support others to learn and are taking a lead to help others get to grips with digital. **Many are organising informal video calls with their tenant groups to test and trial their preferred platforms to communicate**.

43%

of survey respondents are fairly digital skill confident

Landlord communication

The majority of question respondents, **79%**, reported that their landlord had provided information to outline changes in service specifically relating to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Further details provided in the comments section suggested that a range of communication methods had been utilised:

'My landlord shared changes to services and office working. Placed guidelines on the Facebook page, telephone and email contact with my housing officer and email, telephone and forum (Basecamp) contact with our resident participation lead.'

'They have put out a newsletter, have sent texts, and I have received emails.'

'On their website and newsletter they communicated the changes that would be happening in terms of level of services and how to access services.

As a board member I was emailed to let me know what we were proposing to do to safeguard tenants, residents and our staff also how we would be looking after the properties and service continuation.'

However some reported concerns regarding the level of information they had recieved so far:

A number of focus group participants felt that communication from their landlord could be improved and that more information, and quickly provided, would be a useful resource.

Participants were keen to stress that while they recognised that digital communication was crucial at this time, there was still an important role for posted newsletters, telephone calls etc.

Furthermore, focus group members were keen to stress that **communication is equally important between tenants**. Opportunities to share information, good practice examples, and tenant to tenant support and advice should be facilitated.
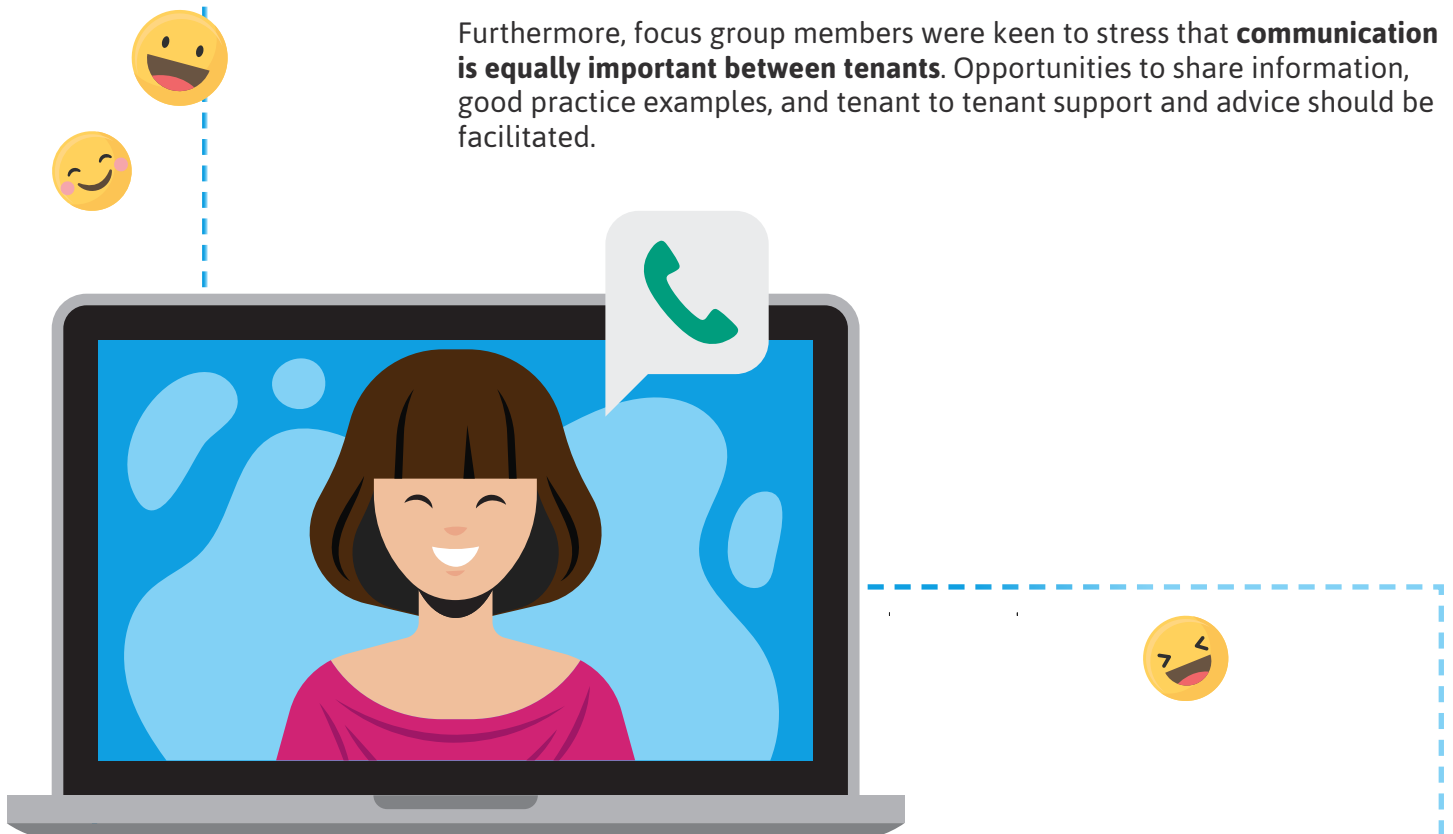
Landlord communication

The most common form of communication was mail/post, with **84%** of question respondents reporting that their landlord communicates with them this way.

Additionally, **70%**, reported their landlord communicating through telephone calls, **66%**, through email, **38%**, through text message, and **18%** communicate through social media.

The majority of question respondents, **70%**, highlighted that they were not receiving regular newsletters or bulletins from their landlord digitally.

This was re-enforced by focus group participants, who agreed that in most areas, and at both local and national level, there has been conversation circulating regarding driving digital and online communication forward, but further action and implementation would be beneficial.

The majority, **84%**, of question respondents would be comfortable with their landlord communicating through email. **78%** would be comfortable with telephone calls, **64%** with SMS text message, and **31%** would communicate through an instant messenger.

Encouragingly, **27%**, would be comfortable communicating by video call.

Participation and scrutiny

A majority, **71%**, of question respondents were currently involved in tenant participation or scrutiny activities.

Encouragingly an overwhelming **70%** of question respondents would like to continue with their involvement in tenant participation or scrutiny activities remotely throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.

A majority, **78%**, of question respondents claimed that their landlord had not yet indicated if and how tenant participation and scrutiny activities would progress throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.

**61%** of question respondents felt they had the required resources and skill set to continue with tenant participation and scrutiny activities remotely throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.

47% of question respondents who are not already involved in a tenant resident or community group expressed an interest in getting involved digitally, and using online communication platforms to facilitate this.

70%
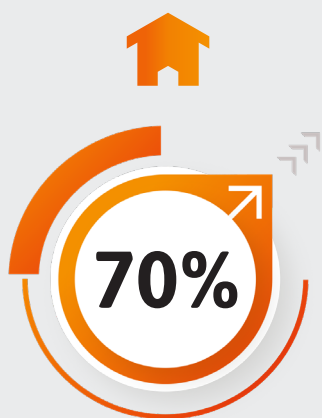
would like to continue participation or scrutiny

47%
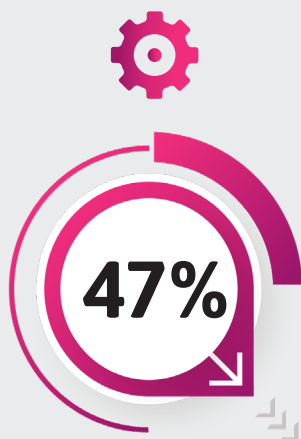
not already involved would like to, digitally

Comments

Notably some of the question respondents made the following comments:

'I think that as a group we should be able to use digital technology on our own without the support of the housing association.

What we need from the association is the contact details of all those who attend meetings so that we can contact them to see if they would join us in a group Zoom meeting for instance.'

'We need online support classes to allow us to do this confidently.'

Comments made by focus group respondents identified a recognition of the opportunities presented by the current situation:

"Although there might have been a reluctance to get online in the past, the COVID-19 pandemic has forced our hand. Tenants are actually viewing and embracing digital as a positive and are keen to find out more."

"This is an excellent opportunity to grow participation, increase attendance, and get young or hard to reach people involved – digital is not a solution just for now, but a new way of working."

Conclusion

Ultimately, the findings reported in this study demonstrate that **tenants are willing to embrace digital technology and online resources to stay connected** – and there is a need for support in order to make this work. Recurring themes and issues raised throughout are concluded below:

Regular up-to-date information in respect of service change and delivery during office closures is necessary;

Individuals are keen to stay connected both to their landlord, and wider tenant community;

Many are willing to embrace digital technology, and for the first time, in order to stay engaged;

Access to resources, equipment and support is required;

Tenants involved in current engagement and participation activities are keen for these to continue, and a large number of individuals who are not currently involved have indicated they wish to do so digitally;

A recognition that current COVID-19 restrictions present a unique opportunity to extend reach and this new way or working should be strengthened and continued o achieve long-term strategic goals.

TIS recommendations

Devices
Who has access to equipment? Can devices be made available to existing scrutiny groups/panel members who don't have any?

Connectivity
Consider broadband availability and cost.

Skills
Establishing what training is required and how this can be facilitated both during the current social distancing measures and beyond.

Support
How best to provide support before (setting up and access), during (exploring features, establishing best practice) and after (working offline, disseminating information and agreed actions) digital communication.

Start gradually
Consider hosting a few short fun or conversational sessions, simply to allow tenants to test out the features; share top-tips and get comfortable.

Think strategically
Invest time and resources now to deliver longer term digital engagement priorities. Avoid wasting resources on short term measures, invest to deliver longer term digital priorities.

No time like the present
Encourage staff to take advantage of extra desk-time to develop their digital skills and identify opportunities.

How TIS can support you

Our expert team supports communities and housing organisations to work together to develop effective solutions and services.

We can support tenants, communities, and housing organisations to develop a range of cutting edge solutions and services remotely, utilising digital resources.

Please be assured that emails will be answered as normal at **info@tis.org.uk** and if you need to speak to a member of the team urgently, contact the Glasgow office on **0141 248 1242** where your call will be diverted.