



National Consumer Council

Introduction:

The National Consumer Council is the independent consumer policy experts, championing the consumer interest to bring about change for the benefit of all consumers. Our work covers a broad range of sectors including debt, consumer education, public services and sustainable consumption. In the housing sector specifically our most recent work was with the Cabinet Office Service First Unit and Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council on a project which assessed how local authority housing managers should engage with tenants and local residents. Involving Users 1999.

Stronger Voice:

The Stronger Voice initiative aims to build the skills, confidence and effectiveness of consumer and community representatives on a variety of public service consultation panels, management committees and other forums for service-user participation. It comes as a self-contained flexible package of training.

Project Description:

The Innovation into Action project aimed to develop and pilot the existing Stronger Voice package to ensure it suited the needs of tenants and residents. The project was to develop elements within Stronger Voice to train tenants, residents and managers to work effectively together on tenant and community participation committees by building confidence, understanding of their role, and the relationship with other members of the group, including committee skills.

Stronger Voice comes as a Trainers Toolkit and Training Manual that enable trainers to develop a bespoke course and run it in their own locality. Based on the findings from the pilots run by the East Midlands Tenants Participation Forum, our partners in the project, the relevant material was written to suit the specific needs of tenants and tenant trainers and tested again in September and November 2003. Our partnership with the East Midlands Tenant Participation Forum has enabled us to get feedback from both tenant representatives and participation officers. Annex 1 and 2 summarise the findings from the test phases.

The materials have been developed and incorporated into the support materials. Most of it will go on the website, some is already in the pack, and a brief supplement on housing will be printed in January 2004. Annex 4 includes a copy of the web based materials.

Method:

The National Consumer Council (NCC) formed a partnership with the East Midlands Tenant Participation Forum (EMTPF) as a steering group to carry out the development and research. Funding was granted by the Chartered Institute of Housing and Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (formerly DTRL) Innovation into Action and the Housing Corporation Innovation and Good practice grant schemes. The project was to:

1. Write and produce new training materials for the generic Stronger Voice pack.
2. Review the new training material through the East Midlands TPF pilot group.
3. Develop and run induction course for trainers and from both Registered Social Landlord and local authorities.
4. New trainers to run a course for their local group, to assess how effectively and easily they find delivering the course with their community committees.
5. Make and test final changes to training pack.
6. Final changes formatted and available.

Stages one and two were completed in the pilot phase when consultant trainer Jane Smith looked at ways to improve the course and to make it more user-friendly. Members of the East Midlands TP Forum and the NCC reviewed Jane's proposals and modified the materials accordingly. Stages 3 and 4 were completed in the summer of 2002 when courses were run in Lincolnshire, Leicester, Nottingham, and South Derbyshire (See annex 1). The final version was tested in courses run by East Midlands TPF in September and November 2003 (see annex 2).

The final phase will be implemented in January 2004, constituting web-based training resources and supplementary information in hard copy. The resignation of the Stronger Voice project officer in September 2003 has delayed the project as his post is still vacant and the NCC has few alternative resources on which to draw.

Involving beneficiaries:

Tenants as a whole will benefit from having more effective representatives engaging with the housing management. By working with the East Midlands tenant Participation Forum and tenant trainers, we have been able to involve directly those most likely to benefit from the training. We have successfully use feedback from trainee representatives to improve the final version of the materials.

With training, tenant representatives will be:

1. Better equipped to engage confidently and constructively with the Housing Management
2. Able to set their own agenda based on tenant priorities
3. Better informed of the views of other tenants and residents
4. Sure of their role and the way that committees work
5. Some tenants representatives will also become trainers

In 2004 the National consumer Council will be putting in place a strategy for the next phase of this project. We have already had some preliminary discussions with potential national partners in the housing sector to promote and run training.

Evaluation:

We have received constructive and encouraging feedback from tenant trainers and tenant/resident representatives after each session through an open feedback and a written questionnaire.

Annex 1

Stronger Voice in Housing Pilot course 2002

Feedback analysis and report

Objectives

1. To assess the applicability and user-friendliness of Stronger Voice for tenant representatives in both RSLs and Housing Authorities
2. To assess the usability of the training package for trainers who have a range of training experience and skills
3. To highlight any further improvements to be made to the training package

Development

Stronger Voice is designed so that a trainer can modify the course to suit different representative groups. NCC was already developing the generic course with added features and flexibility. To modify the course for tenants, a training specialist in the housing sector, Jane Smith, added new exercises, text and a Social Housing information pack based on feedback from our previous pilot courses in 2001 with EMTPF and steering group meetings in January and March 2002.

Trainers' Induction day

Nine trainers, selected by EMTPF, attended an induction course. The trainers had a mixed background. Four were from RSLs, five from local authorities, half of the trainers were Tenant Participation Officers for service providers and half were tenants. Half the trainers had significant training experience, but for some this was their first course. Additionally there was a mix of rural and urban-based trainers.

Pilot courses

Five pilot courses ran in May and June 2002. Each pilot course was run over two days for the following organisations:

| Organisation | Experience of trainer | Number of trainees |
|---|------------------------------|---------------------------|
| Longhurst Housing Association, Lincolnshire | Experienced trainer | 6 |
| Leicester Housing Federation | Inexperience trainer | 6 |
| City of Nottingham Council | Inexperienced trainer | 8 |
| Rockingham Forest Housing Association and Charnwood Borough Council | Experienced trainer | 5 |
| South Derbyshire District Council | Experienced trainer | 5 |
| | | Total 30 |

The 19 equal opportunities forms returned showed that the trainees varied little in terms of culture and age. 100% of trainees were white. Less than a third of the trainees were under 60. The youngest person was 28. Some disabilities were represented, but only one trainee was registered as disabled. Almost half of the trainees were female.

Key Findings

Courses run by the more experienced trainers received much more positive feedback than those run by inexperienced trainers. One practical suggestion was to change the first module (defining representation) which felt too theoretical, long and repetitive.

The intentional lack of page numbering (to enable trainers to add and remove material to suit their group) caused consistent problems directing trainees to the appropriate section.

Some of the terminology was difficult but trainers adapted the materials appropriately. We suggest the language is simplified throughout the training manual and a jargon-buster is added. Using the word consumer instead of tenant in the training material confused many trainees.

Some experienced representatives also thought that the material was at a too low level for them. They knew who they represented and felt they didn't learn much.

The Housing Supplement and history of the movement contained useful information but was too heavy.

Many trainees thought that they needed to spend more time on particular sections, and that the course needs an injection of fun.

The pilots have given the trainers good and challenging experiences and course participants have developed on-going relationships.

The course may not be suitable to everyone. It is an invaluable tool for tenant board members especially as the market for stock transfers is growing.

Conclusions

- Stronger Voice should be delivered by trainers with adequate training skills and experience.
- Quality control of trainers is vital in assuring that Stronger Voice is delivered as a consistently high standard.
- The course suits a range of people but needs more flexibility to be easily modified to suit the audience and more guidance to trainers.
- The course material needs more housing oriented examples and activities.

Annex 2

Report of the two-day training session run by the East Midlands Tenant Forum on 23 September and 7 November 2003

Background

The East Midlands Tenants Forum has been involved with Stronger Voice for two years, from its original format through two revisions. We have been helping to develop the package as a training tool for tenants representing the views of others. As a result of the first pilot (see annex 1) the package has been significantly revised and changes made to the supporting material.

Re-testing the materials

We used the two sessions in the autumn of 2003 to rigorously test the revised package with a group of tenants who were new to the exercise.

Findings

The sessions were successful, and participants found the new materials much easier to relate to. We concluded that the revisions have been successful. Significantly the concept of tenants as consumers, which had been a stumbling block in the first pilot, caused no problem in this phase. The group related well to consumer issues and most did see themselves as consumers.

We introduced some pictures specifically relating to housing to stimulate discussion on the first session, and recommend that the NCC incorporate some photographs specific to housing in the trainers' materials.

A session analysing what rent monies are sued for was also well-received, stimulating lively discussion and debate. Again, we recommend this activity is included in the trainers' notes.

For there homework session we encouraged participants to use the web references listed in the supporting information, providing even wider learning and experiential opportunities for the trainees, some of whom had not used the web for research. We were lucky to have access to a cyber café at the training venue, which was an enormous advantage. We suggest NCC adds this as a suggestion for trainers.

We tested the 'lego' game exercise, which was also successful, and a vast improvement to the previous role play. The exercise supported a discussion about roles, later extended to include the good and bad points about meetings.

One participant brought a copy of their newsletter and asked for feedback on it. This unplanned activity proved to be very useful to prompt thinking and discussion in small and large groups about whom you represent, accessibility issues and feedback. Again, the pack could suggest this exercise too.

Supplement

The supplement needs to be regularly updated. We have suggested some amendments.

Course evaluation

Generally, the feedback is positive about the course and the content. Numbered pages would make it easier to navigate the pack, and some delegates found the paper too glossy. One had difficulty reading the material, although a large print version would resolve this problem.

Conclusions

This version is an improvement on the original, but NCC should consider including the recommendations above.

The training will be useful for tenants and for other members of management boards.

One participant who started off feeling the pack was not appropriate for old hands like himself found by the end that he had found a new way of looking at things.

Annex 3

Budget account

| | | |
|------------------|---|-----------------|
| 27 June 2002 | J McCulloch, travel expenses | 63.65 |
| 27 April 2002 | Printflow, to print training handbooks | 422.41 |
| 30 April 2002 | Lol Sanford, design of materials | 287.87 |
| 6 May 2002 | G TS training, consultant fees | 1,091.57 |
| 11 June 2002 | E Midlands TP Forum fees and expenses | 980.00 |
| 13 January 2003 | E Midlands TP Forum trainers expenses | 572.18 |
| 03 November 2003 | GTS training, consultant fees | 641.11 |
| January 2004 | Final production costs and Website update | |
| | Estimated consultant fees | 850.00 |
| | Total | 4,908.79 |

Activities – who’s consuming what? Where does the money go? (A1) Role play (D1) Lego game (D4)

Annex 4 SV – Housing – Material for the trainers’ website

A1 Activity – Who’s consuming what?

Use a range of pictures representing (6 from 7)

Repairs – trades person/van/tools

Rent – rent card/swipe card/money

Customer service – office/call centre

Development – new houses/building

Housing Benefit – benefits office/form

Communal Services – stairs/lights/landscaping

Arrears – eviction/bad debts

Activity D1

Compton Lane Community Association

You are a tenant on the housing estate served by Compton Lane Community association. The Association is the governing body for Compton Lane Community Centre, and you have recently been elected onto the management committee.

The Association currently runs a number of activities at the centre

- Pensioners’ forum and lunch club
- Community education sessions
- Creche and playgroup
- Credit union
- Youth group

A reduction in grant funding from the council means that some changes will need to be made. The association is faced with the following choices

- Reduce the provision for one or more groups
- Increase fees for use of the centre
- Apply elsewhere for funding

Activities – who’s consuming what? Where does the money go? (A1) Role play (D1) Lego game (D4)

Smith Square Community Forum

Background information for new members

The Community Forum has been running for several years now and has regularly represented tenants’ views to the council.

Many of the original members remain on the committee for example the chair, Mr/Mrs Brown, has led the committee since birth. We are grateful for the time members have put into the committee over the years, but we are also aware the we need new members if the Forum is going to continue. This is a good time to join our committee as for the first time in many years it looks as though some additional funding may be coming our way.

The Council has recently consulted the Forum about its views on estate improvements. A 'Planning for real' exercise was held at the Forum's annual Fete and Car Boot Sale. This came up with lots of problems and ideas for the areas in general, but particularly for the Smith Square Estate.

Lots of people gave their views, and some volunteered to join the Forum. The Council has a small pot of money available to spend on improvements, and we would like to use our next Forum Meeting to decide what the priorities should be.

We are looking forward to welcoming new members to our next meeting, along with Mr/Mrs Jones, the Council's new estate development officer who replaces Jenny Long. Jenny has been the main contact with the Council for many years, and the Forum will miss her.

Activities – who's consuming what? Where does the money go? (A1) Role play (D1) Lego game (D4)

Smith Square Community Forum

Summary of issues raised at the community planning event

This was a 'Planning for real' event for members of the community. While it was aimed at the community across the whole of the ward, there were a number of issues raised to help it with future plans. The following is an unprioritised list.

My problems:

- Noise late at night from children and youths on the estate
- People using the estate as a rat run
- Kids hanging round the community centre – vandalism and graffiti
- Vandalism and petty crime
- Rubbish and litter on the estate, especially on empty spaces
- Children playing football in the garage area
- Too much traffic
- Vacant land next to the community centre an eye-sore

My ideas:

- Improve street lighting
- More police patrols
- Traffic calming – humps etc
- Demolish the community centre and build some new houses
- Replace play and sports equipment on playing field
- Skateboard park next to community centre

Activities – who's consuming what? Where does the money go? (A1) Role play (D1) Lego game (D4)

Smith Square Community Forum

Minutes of the meeting held on 30 April 2003

Unfortunately no one from the council was able to attend this meeting as Jenny Long had just left. The Forum secretary, Mr/Mrs Albert, was also absent. No formal minutes were therefore produced because of the preparation for the Fete and Car Boot Sale. The three Forum members present agreed that it would be useful to call a meeting after the community planning event, and also to encourage new members to get involved as attendance at meeting has been falling off over recent months.

Agenda for the meeting on 30 June 03

1. Welcome to new members and apologies for absence
2. Minutes of the meeting held on 30 April and matters arising
3. To consider the report from community planning day
4. Recommendation to the council
5. Date and time of next meeting – 30 August 2.00pm

Mr/Mrs Brown

As the chair of the community forum for the last seven years she has enjoyed a cosy relationship with Jenny Long who has just retired.

Jenny was happy to go along with most of what Mr/Mrs Brown wanted to keep the meetings ticking over, so Mr/Mrs Brown used to having their own way in meetings – especially as many of original members have left and those that remain are indifferent.

Represents some of the older residents on the estate who resent recent changes and some of the newer arrivals. Mainly concerned about the increase in cars and traffic on the estate.

Mr/Mrs Albert

The reluctant secretary of the Forum, who only became secretary at the last AGM because no one else would do the job.

Has been a member of the Forum for almost as long as Mr/Mrs Brown. Feels intimidated by Mr/Mrs Brown but the prospect of new members has given hi,/her new hope. Would really like to do something for the children on the estate because he/she feels that there are not the facilities/freedom for young people that there were when his/her own children were growing up.

Mr/Mrs Jones

The new estate development officer, and full of life and ideas. He/she is keen to develop ideas from the community-planning event, but is aware that finances directly from the council will be limited. However, is also aware of other funding opportunities that community groups can access, he/she was previously a grant officer with the Lottery Board (now community fund).

Mr/Mrs Plant

Has only lived on the estate for a few months and is a single parent. He/she was an enthusiastic contributor to the community-planning event as wants to improve the environment for his/her growing children. Is particularly concerned about the lack of facilities for older children. On his/her previous estate residents had been involved with developing community facilities at the neighbourhood school.

Mr/Mrs Bold

Only really attending the meeting out of curiosity. Although a tenant for several years, he/she had never really seen the relevance of the Forum. His/her new friend, Mr/Mrs Plant, had persuaded him/her to attend.

Mr/Mrs Rusk

A regular attendee of the Forum for many years, usually abstains when decisions are being made. Not really comfortable with the position he/she finds himself/herself in at times with the Forum, but likes to feel part of the community.

P.C Dash

The community policeman/woman. Is expected to attend all Forum meetings but has not been able to do so recently because dates have not been set in advance, or have been changed at the last minute.

Is heavily involved with the council's community safety initiatives, and has lots of experience from community work elsewhere in the district.

Observers

Will be looking for information about the scenario to feedback to us all. In particular

Behaviour

Spoke and body language –

Were any offensive language or personal comments used?

If jargon used, was it explained?

Examples of positive/negative body language illustrating when someone was receptive or hostile?

Were people involved and allowed to contribute?

Were there interruptions or going back over the same ground?

Did it appear that people felt comfortable in the meeting?

Process

Did people appear to have sufficient information for the discussion?

Did people know what was expected of them from the meeting/

Did the meeting reach a conclusion?

Was there an opportunity for people to raise questions or gain clarification?

Was there a summary of discussion before decisions were made?

Progress

Did the meeting end with clear action points – who/what/when.

Was there agreement about any follow up action?

Developing Our Own Checklist –

What makes a good meeting/enables me to survive a bad one?

Activities – who’s consuming what? Where does the money go? (A1) Role Play (D1) Lego game (D4)

Management and Service Charges

Use the chart to kick off a discussion on how rent money is used. You can link this exercise to the pictures, to stimulate participants to think through what happens to the rent and service charges they pay.

Local authorities and Housing associations account for their money in different ways, so these items may be presented to tenants in different ways. Local authorities, for example, may not show service charges as a separate item. But this could form part of the discussion.

| Housing Management costs | Service charges | Day to day repairs | Maintenance repairs | Other overheads and operating costs |
|-------------------------------|----------------------|---|---------------------|---------------------------------------|
| Management and administration | Care taking | | | Office costs |
| Estate based staff | Wardens | Urgent repairs electrics, plumbing, storm damage | Re-roofing | Equipment |
| Property insurance | Landscaping | Non-urgent repairs, broken appliances | Re-painting | Banking and financial services |
| Legal costs | Communal Lighting | | | Arrears, bad debt, Legal advice |
| Other professional costs | Alarm systems | | | Accountancy |
| Advertising and recruitment | | | | |
| Training | | | | |
| Tenant participation | | | | |

D4 Alternative to the role play

Lego game – for team/committee skills

You will need about 30 minutes plus discussion time

Components

- Lego base
- 15 red blocks
- 15 white blocks
- 15 blue blocks
- 15 yellow blocks
- 1 window

Job Cards

1. the bottom row of blocks must be all red
2. the builder
3. no row should be all yellow
4. blues blocks must not be above 4th row
5. you must make sure all components are used
6. the window should be above 3rd floor
7. the overseer

The aim is to produce a construction together without speaking. It will test leadership, and team skills – and should provided an opportunity for discussion afterwards.