



Resident Engagement Rolls On at Ashram

Ashram's going through a lot of cultural changes in order to develop its resident engagement strategy. Louise Creswick, Resident Engagement Co-ordinator for the Accord Group, says that staff attitudes to engaging with residents have changed significantly in recent months. "Staff have started to embrace it," she says: "It's embedded." Whereas previously it may have been viewed as something on the side, to occasionally take notice of, it's now something that's part of mainstream practice: what Louise calls a "golden thread" runs through everything, from estate walkabouts and simply talking to residents whilst doing repairs, to board membership for residents and taking systematic feedback after events. Staff will typically, through the reports they produce, think of the impact of any resident engagement practice in the short *and* long term.

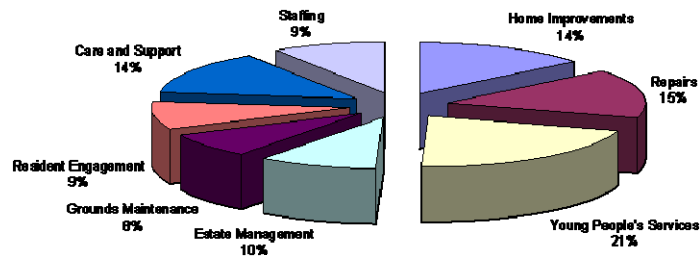
The scope of resident engagement encompasses both high-level examples and very local events. Residents are represented on Ashram's Board of Trustees. Below this focus groups on particular issues, such as the newsletter and website and housing and repairs are all established. Residents are also offered training in a range of subjects, such as assertiveness; they serve as 'Estate Champions' and of course there are the events.

For Kim Gill and Amanda Nicholls as well as Louise, the annual Big Do represents the highlight of resident engagement. Amanda outlines it as a "participative, interactive fun day". A creative range of events allow residents to give their views, thoughts and comments on Ashram. In November 2008



there was a Big Brother style Diary Room; a 'Star Wall' for residents to rate anything from estate management to the newsletter; and a Bank of Ashram where residents decided how they would spend their rent money if they were Ashram. Popular answers to the latter included young peoples' services, repairs and home improvement. In addition Brenda Neal received a Good Neighbour 2008 award: she'd been nominated for

the work she did helping an ill neighbour. On receiving her prize, Brenda said she felt "so special" and assured Ashram she would enjoy her champagne prize.



The Bank of Ashram Results, 2008

Innovative thinking characterises resident engagement at Ashram. Amanda and the rest of the staff know that one has to think beyond meetings some of the time— some people just won't want to engage in this traditional, rather formal way. And of course resident engagement has to account for the high number of single mothers in Ashram accommodation, and so kid-friendly activities like the Wii Competition and henna painting were present at the Big Do.

Residents get involved in the planning, too. The Neighbours' Day at Achal Close was driven by estate inhabitants asking for more activity at Coventry. Residents at Achal Close were aware that their estate could be improved, that they weren't proud of living there as it was. And so the day saw residents



take ownership of their space, cleaning it up, painting communal fences, planting and decorating. Feedback from the day suggested residents were satisfied with the event and appreciated working with Ashram, the fun events put on for children, being

together with other residents and sprucing up the estate. Community cohesion is an important principle in Ashram, which judged this event to have made a difference in this area.

Louise says she personally gets a lot out of events. "It's nice to see all residents come together, to put a smile on their face," she comments. Not all residents are active all the time, but the Big Do allows those that traditionally stay hidden to socialise and supply feedback. And it's an opportunity to thank

those residents that do a lot for their area. For Kim, thriving on the fact that she's made a difference to someone's well-being, quality of life, concern or mood motivates her for the next event.

Getting residents' feedback through a variety of methods is important. For a start there is the importance of feedback on events themselves and Impact Assessments generally find the impact to be either 'medium' or 'high'. Feeding back on estate issues is done through 'Estate Champions', who put themselves forward and are then put to the ballot on their respective estates. For the National Conversation Ashram went door-to-door and telephoned residents. Ashram learnt that residents wanted more input on localised estate issues such as choice in contractors. Ashram put on a Chinese buffet for an in-person National Tenant Voice event, where residents gave their thoughts on how they would like to communicate with the NTV.



Letting residents shape the nature of their engagement is a key principle for Ashram and in recent years it has made an effort to move towards a 'bottom-up' approach. Amanda is aware that anything less than "working alongside the people" isn't good enough – and that this will lead to building a relationship of trust, key in amongst communities which often feel marginalised and disadvantaged. Louise singles out a couple of staff who are particularly strong at translating the principles of resident engagement into reality: Dan Whistler helped get the Achal Close event off the ground; Terry Cashmore has frequently got residents on board to become Estate Champions.

Despite the staff achievements and the residents' participation there are nevertheless challenges to the resident engagement work at Ashram. As noted above, residents with children need to be catered for, yet the presence of kids can put a stop to any plans for a formal, structured meeting! As well as this young people need to be listened to, and often have strong opinions. To address this latter factor Ashram hired Amanpreet, who carried out a consultation in Sparkbrook on gaps in service provision for young people. She got young people to identify their problems with a lack of local facilities and treatment from the police. Amanpreet is still a 'bank' staff member of Ashram's, and the organisation is continually striving to understand the specifics of local opinion.

Finally, there's the importance of building up trust, which will be an ongoing process for Ashram. The Achal Close event was designed because Coventry residents thought they were being ignored in favour of their counterparts to the north-west. One believes that as a result of Ashram's positive, considered response to this, engagement with Coventry residents will become ever

stronger. Responding to residents' concerns and acting upon them proves that 'engagement' isn't just a buzz word. It's a considered principle that underpins every aspect of Ashram's work.