



Cambridge City Council Housing
Report of Focus Groups – July 2015

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- 1 Topic Guide
- 2 Transcripts of Focus Groups

1. BACKGROUND AND INTRODUCTION

1.1 PURPOSE OF THE GROUPS

1.1.1 The purpose of the groups was to explore issues raised in the 2014 Tenants' Survey and pertinent to the future plans of Cambridge City Council Housing. Key issues included how customers want and need to be kept informed; perceptions around value for money and waste and how tenants and leaseholders are reacting and preparing for proposed welfare reforms.

1.1.2 Key areas for review in the focus groups were:

- **Image** *What image does CCC housing services currently portray? What image should they be portraying?*
- **'Us & Them'** – *what are the big issues for feelings of ownership of their home?*
- **Information** – *what is currently received – how this is received and what experiences have been had?*
- **Perceptions of 'waste' and value for money** - *what do Tenants and Leaseholders use to rate the value for money of a service received?*
- **Readiness for welfare reform**

1.1.3 These issues were developed into a topic guide which explored the above and this report is divided into the following sections with a summary of key findings:

INFORMATION

- Information currently received and how it is rated
- What experiences lead to positive or negative perceptions?
- What is the ideal and should this be expected?

VALUE FOR MONEY

- Value for money – what is 'good' and what is 'poor' value for money?
- What is reasonable to expect?

WELFARE REFORM

- Awareness of Welfare Reform
- Preparedness for welfare reform

1.2 THE GROUPS

1.2.1 Four groups were held over the 8th and 9th July with participants who were tenants able to choose from the following venues and times. One leaseholder asked to attend a group for tenants as she was unable to attend the morning group allocated to leaseholders. Each group ran for approximately 90 minutes.

- Evening Group – Cherry Hinton Village Centre – 7 Tenants
- Afternoon Group – East Barnwell Community Centre – 9 Tenants
- Morning Group – Meadows Community Centre – 10 Tenants, 1 Leaseholder
- Leaseholders were offered a morning meeting
- Morning – Mill Road Depot – 11 Leaseholders

1.2.2 Recruitment of the groups was from previous respondents to a survey carried out in 2014 who had agreed they would be prepared to take part in further research. Initial contact seeking expressions of interest in participating in the groups was by email and telephone, with letters of confirmation being sent out following the initial contact and a further telephone call to confirm attendance and to check on any access or transport needs. Recruitment was targeted in order to achieve a cross section of age and gender and ethnic group. In addition recruitment also ensured a mix of new and established tenants.

1.2.3 A total of 50 tenants or leaseholders were recruited with an attendance of 38, (76%); with the majority of non-attenders telephoning on the day to give their apologies. Taxis were provided for those who required assistance with transport, (7 respondents).

1.2.4 The groups followed a broadly similar topic guide, (attached as Appendix 1), with some differences between groups as issues emerged in the discussions. All four groups were tape recorded and transcribed with the permission of participants, and copies of these (anonymised) transcripts are attached as Appendix 2.

1.2.5 Where comments from participants have been included in the report the page number from the transcript has been noted together with the letters of the group from which it was taken, i.e.: Cambridge Meadows – CM; Cambridge East Barnwell – CEB; Cambridge Cherry Hinton – CCH; and Cambridge Leaseholders – CL. However, it should be noted that although location was a factor in the decision of participants as to which group they should attend, the timing of the group was also taken into consideration. It cannot therefore be assumed that comments apply to the location in which the group was held.

2.0 SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS

INFORMATION

2.1 Information

- 2.1.1 Whilst perceptions of being well informed were high amongst tenants leaseholders felt less well informed. Evidence throughout this report suggests a poorer relationship between leaseholders and the housing service often appearing to be caused by lack of information or communication.
- 2.1.2 On the other hand tenants, whilst identifying areas where information and communications might be improved were generally happy with the amount of information they receive. The Council is seen as caring and supportive especially for those with special needs.
- 2.1.3 The 'Open Door' magazine was considered informative, well presented and interesting by tenants but could be improved by more information on localities with a number of participants only looking through the magazine to see if there were any articles with stories local to themselves. Letters and suggestions pages were requested to overcome the concern that editorial control makes the publication a 'marketing' device for the housing service.
- 2.1.4 Leaseholders were less happy than tenants with 'Open Door' which was thought not particularly relevant to them with some suggesting that there should be dedicated sections of the magazine for leaseholders and others feeling that they neither needed nor wanted to receive information in this way. This is not to say that the publication itself was criticised, which it was not, simply the relevance to leaseholders.
- 2.1.5 'Open Door' is the primary source of information for tenants with few participants mentioning other sources. A few mentioned tenants meetings, meetings at day centres; noticeboards and contact with councillors. Several leaseholders had attended leaseholder meetings but these were criticised for the lack of information there, the lack of attendance by other leaseholders and the time of day they were held. The notice given for the meetings was also reported as being short, (two or three days prior), which also make it difficult for people to attend even if they wish to.

2.2 Communications

- 2.2.1 Where communications appear to be less well praised is when queries have been raised, via email, in person or on the telephone and tenants are waiting for a response. It was a common complaint by some participants across all groups that messages are left and the council does not respond although it should be said that this was not a universal experience. It therefore suggests that whilst the systems for response are in place they are not always adhered to.
- 2.2.2 The opportunity to make contact through the website was not generally known and the website was said to be not easy to navigate in this respect. The most common means of making contact was over the telephone and whilst this worked well for many the 'long wait'

to be transferred to repairs was a common problem. Advertising separate numbers (back of 'Open Door') leads to customers having to repeat their needs, (i.e. assuming they have reached repairs because they have rung that number they then need to be transferred and to 'tell their story' again). Frustrations with the telephone system can lead to tenants visiting the housing offices where they feel they are more likely to be seen more quickly and listened to more attentively.

- 2.2.3 Unlike tenants the majority of leaseholders preferred electronic communications to the telephone, paper or face to face contact. It was suggested by leaseholders that the Council is 'behind the times' in the way in which information is recorded, and the communication skills of some of their staff. In addition they expected 24/7 access to services. It was not clear from the discussion however if the current means of having such contact was not suitable for their needs or whether they were unaware of the opportunity to do so. There was however a perception that customers should 'work to' the time frames set by the council rather than those available for the customer.
- 2.2.4 Leaseholders particularly had concerns about their preferences for means of contact with them not being adhered to by housing services which on occasions has led to them missing important information.

2.3 Keeping People Informed

- 2.3.1 Participants were asked directly how the Council could reassure them that when they have made a request or are expecting planned maintenance, that they had 'not been forgotten'. Some participants clearly felt that they had been 'forgotten' when promised planned maintenance (e.g. loft insulation) with no timescales given. Letters, emails or even text messages for some would be acceptable to update/reassure them possibly on a quarterly basis.
- 2.3.2 Several participants related incidents where the delays they had experienced were due to contractor delay. In one instance this appeared to be due to lack of materials management and in others a lack of staffing to answer calls and to ensure follow up to requests for service.
- 2.3.3 The timing of correspondence from the council relating to issues such as 'section 20 works', which were sent too close to the events to allow leaseholders to respond, it was alleged. This led the more cynical of the leaseholders to assume that this was because their representations were unlikely to change the course of events. There is therefore a need to assure leaseholders that their comments and concerns will be taken into account in the decision making process.

2.4 Suggested Improvements to Communications

- 2.4.1 To improve communications participants made a number of suggestions. Firstly they identified the need for more ‘two way’ flow of information with more contact initiated by the Council in order to keep people informed. There was also a demand to know who their housing officers are although it was noted in the groups that the perceived attitude of housing officers differed and there is a need to ensure consistency of service and attitude.
- 2.4.2 As to the means of communication there were mixed views with several participants seeking text alerts, online communication, emails, etc. and updates being provided through the housing website. However others dismissed these due to lack of knowledge or lack of appropriate equipment, (computers, tablets, mobile phones etc.). There was a request for the main telephone number not being a 0845 number as this was said to be paid for by those who only had access to a mobile phone.
- 2.4.3 Validity of information was also queried, especially in relation to the information given by contractors to tenants. Tenants spoke of times when they had received information after the work had been done. It was therefore identified that not only is there a need for communication between tenants and the council and tenants and the contractors but also between contractors and the council.
- 2.4.4 Accuracy of information passed from the Council to contractors and to tenants was also identified as an issue and the need for a customer relationship management system that logs the customer information and requests that have been made. (This may already exist but evidence from participants suggested it is not used to full effect).
- 2.4.5 It should be noted however that whilst this report highlights areas for improvement so that a picture of the ‘ideal’ can be formed, in general tenants were happy with the communications they receive and the way in which responsive and planned maintenance is handled.
- 2.4.6 Whilst most tenants appear aware of their responsibilities and feel kept up to date with any changes leaseholders seem less well informed and areas that require clarification include the responsibilities of the leaseholder and the freeholder in greater detail. Participants complained of ‘superficial responses’, when information is sought. Some information given to leaseholders appears to have been erroneous in the past giving cause for concern especially when asked to pay considerable sums of money over short periods of time. In addition leaseholders felt less well informed than tenants about who is in a similar position to themselves, i.e. who the other leaseholders are. This in part may be due to mixed tenure when there are tenants and leaseholders in the same block, as where the whole block is single tenure, evidence was given that showed significant joint working is possible.
- 2.4.7 It is possible that staff are not fully aware of the information when leaseholders pose questions and there is a need for information to be supplied following the initial conversation. However, the phenomenon of being told that someone would come back to them was so prevalent in the leaseholder group to suggest that ‘not coming back to them’ is a relatively common problem.

- 2.4.8 There appears to be a lack of ‘ownership’ of issues both for tenants and leaseholders which becomes apparent when the more intransigent, rather than the day to day, problems arise. This apparent lack of accountability was felt to have negatively affected the relationship between the service and customers. Therefore a direct line and a named person to contact was thought essential to improving relationships and the service received.

VALUE FOR MONEY

Participants debated the concept of ‘value for money’, how this is exhibited and how customers might believe they have had poor value for money.

2.5 Affordability

- 2.5.1 The affordability of the property in which they are living was of primary importance in respect of perceiving good value for money, both in terms of the level of the rent and in respect of cost of running the property and access to local amenities from that property.

2.6 Managing and Exceeding Expectations

- 2.6.1 Cambridge City Council Housing was noted as ‘good value’ by providing a service which is over and above the expectations of their customers. Specific examples include the efforts made to support people with disabilities or debilitating illnesses; the speed of response, especially to urgent requests; and the quality of the buildings in which the customer is living.
- 2.6.2 Value for money was said by some not to be exceeding, but managing, expectations – informing residents about what they can expect and keeping to that promise. Presentation of the properties and surrounding areas also plays a part in supporting the view that customers are receiving value for money.

2.7 Right First Time and Quality of the Work

- 2.7.1 Whilst many participants thought their current property and the service they received was good value for money, others used their negative experiences to explain the converse. The quality of repair work and any repair being completed ‘right first time’ are key aspects of perceptions of value with a number of participants asserting that this was not always the case. In one group participants were of the view that the Council always chose the ‘cheapest’ price for work and this in itself led to poor value due to the need to repeat the work.

2.8 Responsiveness to Needs

- 2.8.1 Participants identified instances where the Council takes cognisance of the needs of customers leading to a perception of good value for money. Examples such as ‘avoid the school run’ option for repairs and other flexibility added to the alerts of when the work people would arrive.
- 2.8.2 There were negative aspects of the service provided that affected perceptions of value for money. These, relating back to information and communication, included staff not returning calls or needing to be ‘chased’ in order to conclude an issue or even to get action.
- 2.8.3 Leaseholders felt that their ‘slightly different’ (to tenants) needs were not always taken into account by the Council. An example was the changing of doors in one block with all tenants being provided with new doors. These were not offered to leaseholders who said they would have paid to have them provided and fitted.

2.9 Respect and Courtesy

- 2.9.1 Although most participants reported good relationships with staff a few instances of lack of respect or courtesy were reported during the groups. Needless to say this lack of respect affected perceptions of value for money.
- 2.9.2 Some participants felt they were not actively listened to by staff, i.e. they are listened to but this does not result in action following. There was also a perception that if individuals are considered to be ‘troublesome’, (i.e. making complaints or chasing up on non-completions); then they are treated differently to other customers.
- 2.9.3 One aspect of ‘respect’ is how tenants see themselves in relation to the Council. There was evidence of an element of ‘suppliant’ in this relationship, especially with tenants who are currently in receipt of benefits. Participants suggested that they did not demand from the Council because they are currently not paying for the property, (i.e. in receipt of housing benefit). The rents being below market levels also affects how tenants respond to the Council, with one group agreeing that because the rent is low they allow the Council to provide lower standards.
- 2.9.4 Leaseholders felt that there was no way in which any issues they had could be escalated if they had cause for complaint. Should they need to complain, or indeed if they had complained, their comments were simply relayed back to the people who had ‘failed’ them in the first instance.
- 2.9.5 Unlike tenants who seemed to feel an ownership of the relationship with their landlord, leaseholders felt more that this was a business relationship. This is something they regretted with at least one leaseholder feeling they were not treated ‘like a human being’.

2.10 Keeping Promises and Completing Work

2.10.1 A number of tenants felt that they did not get value for money because promised work has not been started and in some cases started but not completed. This is particularly frustrating for leaseholders when work has been charged for as there does not appear to be a connection between finance chasing payment and the record of the non-completion.

2.11 Right Staff for the Job

2.11.1 Participants suggested that some repairs may take longer than others as qualified tradespeople are not as easily available as general handypersons. In order to ensure customers feel they have value for money it is important that the people sent to deal with their issues are recognisably competent and qualified to do the job.

2.11.2 Participants also felt that there was a danger that they were not receiving good value for money because contractors were overestimating the work they can complete in a given time period.

2.12 Supervision and Monitoring

2.12.1 Given the concerns expressed in the discussions participants concluded that project management, monitoring of work and supervision of contractors could be improved in order to increase value for money. Examples of how lack of accountability impacts on customers included unchecked and unsafe kitchen units; confusion about the repairs requested and the adherence to the contract requirements by workers on site. This is particularly galling for leaseholders who are asked to pay for a service which they then do not receive.

2.12.2 Participants felt that by passing the work to a contractor the Council appeared to believe they had negated responsibility and that the responsibility for work completion to standard becomes the contractors. Whilst this is unlikely to be the case the process of how the Council monitors progress and standards is not clear to customers.

2.13 Keeping Customers Informed/Management Systems

2.13.1 Understanding of the priority system and where their particular job is would also assist in reducing frustration and increasing understanding of expectations which would have a positive effect on perception of value for money. This would apply even if work was held up as explanations for this would reduce the frustration of not knowing.

2.13.2 Participants suggested that there was a lack of recording of requests and the customer relationship management system did not provide appropriate information when customers make contact. The expectation is that the system would easily identify the address of the person calling and the most recent request for service would be available without the customer having to repeat it.

2.14 Consistency and Fairness

- 2.14.1 Some participants felt that they were now being asked to take responsibility for things which they have not been informed about and had previously been the Council's responsibility.
- 2.14.2 One aspect of service which participants felt was 'not fair' was the renewal of kitchens when the tenancy changes hands rather than for tenants who have not moved. This suggested that the Council 'cares' more about new than longstanding tenants.
- 2.14.3 The balance between the Council and the customer is weighted towards the Council it was suggested. An example is if a tenant needs to cancel an appointment they are 'automatically sent to the bottom of the list'. However when appointments are cancelled by the Council it was asserted that sometimes the customer is not even told.
- 2.14.4 Some leaseholders even feel bullied by the Council to make payments for work that has not been completed. This may in part be due to the split between finance and the ordering and monitoring of the work.

2.15 Consultation

- 2.15.1 Participants who were leaseholders strongly argued the case for more consultation and discussion about the works to be carried out and the decision process on the services received.

2.16 WELFARE REFORM

- 2.16.1 The groups discussed their awareness and preparedness for welfare reform. The tenant and leaseholder survey that took place the previous year showed a lack of awareness to the implications of changes to the welfare system and this lack of awareness continued with participants in the focus groups despite the fact the groups were held on the day of the Chancellor's Budget and the expectations that this event might have concentrated people's minds.
- 2.16.2 A number of participants would not be affected due to their not being currently in receipt of any benefits and this was the case for all of the participants in the leaseholder group who initially assumed that only tenants might be affected. Although some were worried about the future others assumed that because nothing had affected them to date little would change and for some, even if it does they were going to 'worry about it when it happened'.
- 2.16.3 Participants believed that support and funding is currently or should be available from the Council and also advisors who can assist. Participants advised that information should be made available through Open Door despite the fact that articles had already appeared in this publication. Several participants felt that they would have no idea how to seek assistance should they require it.

The presence of food banks in all parts of the City and the initiative ‘food cycle’ was also brought to the attention of one group, again as issues where participants were generally lacking in knowledge.

- 2.16.4 Many participants were disturbed about the effects of direct payments to tenants of housing benefit on tenants who may find it difficult to manage their budget. That this was now not a matter that the local authority can change was firstly difficult for participants to understand and secondly a worry that many people would find themselves in financial difficulties.
- 2.16.5 In order to ameliorate the problems participants felt some tenants might experience, it was suggested that the Council should identify individuals who they feel may fall into arrears as early as possible to support them prior to problems becoming acute.

3.0 INFORMATION

This section of the report identifies the information customers receive and how it is rated; the experience which lead to positive or negative perceptions and how the current service could be improved in order to reach the ‘ideal’ communications. Issues relating to communications and information were revealed to have significant impact on how ‘value for money’ was assessed and this is discussed both in this and the following section of the report.

Whilst many of the preferred ‘solutions’ to issues were similar for both tenants and for leaseholders there was a significant difference in perceptions of the Council between the two types of tenure. Leaseholders were considerably less satisfied than were tenants as evidenced by the initial discussions about the scoring of how well they are kept informed: tenants scored generally between 7 and 9 on a ranking of 1 to 10, with leaseholders generally scoring rather lower between 5 and 7.

3.1 WHAT INFORMATION IS NEEDED?

- 3.1.1 In brief participants identified the need to be communicated with when they have a need, e.g. repairs or adaptations, and they have alerted the Council to those needs. In addition responsive repairs customers identified the need for information about planned maintenance and any changes to the service they might expect. For planned maintenance participants identified the need to know what would occur, when it would happen, how long it might take for completion and, if any hold up occurred, to be kept informed.
- 3.1.2 In addition to the general needs of customers the groups also contained tenants with special needs. Clearly support for people who have disabilities or require special or additional help is provided quickly and with grace from the staff who were reported to offer speedy and sympathetic response. All participants in the groups who had special needs reported positive responses from Cambridge City Council Housing, (CCCH).

‘Every time I need help, I have it immediately.’ (CM, participant with special needs, pg4)

3.2 INFORMATION FROM ‘OPEN DOOR’ AND OTHER SOURCES

- 3.2.1 In general tenants gave positive reports about the magazine ‘Open Door’ with this publication being described as informative and interesting to most.

‘I find it very well written and laid out.’ (CM, pg1)

‘I’m very happy with the communication that I get from the council through Open Door, which is very informative, and it covers a wide range of issues.... It’s very informative on information like domestic abuse, the houses the council is building, the repairs service, and a lot of other things.’ (CM, pg 3)

- 3.2.2 There was some concern expressed about the editorial control of the magazine and the relevance of some elements for some tenants. To ameliorate the potential reduced interest from the perception of irrelevance the provision of some information for localities would assist. Already some tenants only peruse the magazine to see if there is anything of local interest to them.

'I get information from Open Door, which I guess is what information that the Council decide to put in the magazine. So I'm not quite sure who chooses to put the information in issues, what goes in and what doesn't' (CCH, pg2)

'I have a cursory look through, see if there's anything local in it, and it gets put down for the wife to read.' (CM, pg1)

'I think if the Council wrote once a month, or once every couple of months to say what was going on in that local area, and why they're doing so and so things, would be very useful.' (CCH, pg25)

- 3.2.3 A letters or suggestion page was also suggested so that the magazine becomes more of a two way means of communication with the publication of issues raised by tenants together with the Council's response.

'As far as Open Door is concerned, I think it's a really good, informative magazine. I have no complaints with it other than they could at least put in a part where we could get back to them with suggestions, and making differences.' (CEB, pg1)

- 3.2.4 Other sources of information include tenants meetings, (called by wardens of some accommodation); meetings at day centres; bulletin board at the health centre, (which is was said contained information); and from councillors.

'I get information from this and also once a month our warden does a tenant's meeting.' (CCH, pg2)

'Occasionally I get letters from the Council and there's that bulletin board thing by the health centre where the GP's is, and then also by where the shops are, and I think that's run by the Council and that's very useful.' (CEB, pg1)

'We have a day centre between Hanover and Princess Court which we have meetings over there, and sometimes somebody from the Council will come and give us a talk.' (CEB, pg3)

'If I have any problems I go to see my councillors.' (CM, pg2)

3.3 MEANS OF CONTACT

- 3.3.1 Where communications appear to be less well praised is when queries have been raised, via email, in person or on the telephone and tenants are waiting for a response. It was a common complaint across all groups that messages are left and the council does not respond.

- 3.3.2 This was not a universal experience with one participant reporting that messages about repairs left online have resulted in a telephone call the following day to say that the message

had been received. However the groups claimed that the facility to do this was not common knowledge and the website was not easy to navigate.

'I mainly use email contact. I don't often get a response and I'm constantly chasing, most weeks, for responses from people.' (CCH, pg3)

'If you leave them messages and that they don't always get back to you.' (CM, pg2)

'For repairs, I go online. You can actually do it online now. You can type in what the issue is, give a contact number, and I've always had a phone call the next day to confirm they received it. It's easier than listening to music for half an hour.' (CCH, pg6)

'You can report repairs online, but it isn't advertised anywhere. I think I found out from somebody else. So the Council aren't advertising that and people aren't properly aware of it.' 'The way that it's set out it doesn't explain what you can actually do. Like I said, I found that just by accident, because I was just messing around a bit and it came up.' (CCH, pg7)

- 3.3.3 The most common means of making contact was over the telephone and a number of comments about how this was handled were made in the groups. Firstly there was an issue relating to the length of the wait when asking to be transferred to 'repairs'.

'As a rule, I try and avoid it.' "They have a tendency to ask you if you know which department you want. If you say repairs, nine times out of ten you get stuck on the line listening to music.' 'It is a long wait. Sometimes it can be too long.' (CCH, pg5/6)

'Oh, it's hopeless. Sometimes you hold on for ages and ages. If you've got a computer, it's easier to send an email.' (CEB, pg5)

- 3.3.4 At least part of the problem as identified by participants was the change from locally based telephone numbers, (e.g. for North Arbury Repairs, South Arbury Repairs, etc.); to a centralised system which requires the caller to be put through to a required department. Participants commented on the need to repeat themselves both during the initial call and in respect of follow up calls when they were seeking to be updated on progress.

- 3.3.5 It was further noted that the Open Door magazine still lists separate numbers for different services which are now answered by operatives in a central system. This can exacerbate the frustration felt by tenants who think they have made contact with the repairs service and give details to the call handler only to have to repeat them when they have been transferred to the repairs department.

'It is really annoying to have one central number..... There used to be individual numbers in the phonebook..... it seems now you're always through to their customer service centre, and you have to hang about pressing this button that button, and I don't know why they did that. It is very annoying.' (CEB, pg5)

'It's a bit deceptive too, because on the back of Open Door, you'll find a list of the numbers, and some of them are different for rent and council tax, but they all go through to the same place.' (CEB, pg5)

'Sometimes I might have to explain twice, because for example, you call the repairs number thinking you're through to somebody in repairs, so I launch into my story to be told 'I'll just

put you through to somebody else.’ If I’d known I was being put through to the switchboard, I would’ve just kept it very concise. So I’d say that’s misleading.’ (CEB, pg6)

- 3.3.6 Frustrations with the telephone system can lead to tenants visiting the housing offices where they feel they are more likely to be seen more quickly and listened to more attentively.

‘I find if you want to deal with the Council, the best way is to jump on a bus and go to the actual office. If you talk to them on the phone, you seem to get fobbed off, but you don’t get that when you go to the office.’ ‘It’s a different level of service really. They’re always very nice when you go and see them or talk to them on the phone. They say they’ll do it and help, but then nothing comes of it. Anyway.’ (CCH, pg7)

‘Seven-One, up the road, council offices. So I go there and they’ve been brilliant, and putting new amenities in my flat that’s making my life better.’ (CM, pg3)

3.4 KEEPING PEOPLE INFORMED

- 3.4.1 Participants were asked directly how the Council could reassure them that when they have made a request or are expecting planned maintenance, that they had ‘not been forgotten’. Some participants clearly felt that they had been ‘forgotten’ and an example given related to loft insulation where, it was claimed, the tenant had been promised they would be ‘put on the list’ and then had heard nothing more.

‘They do forget about you. They do.’ ‘Well, I asked about loft insulation last year, and they said they were going to put me on the list for last year, and I haven’t heard anything.’ ‘So there’s been no follow-up. Even a letter would be nice just to say ‘you are on our list, we’ve got a lot of people to get round and we haven’t forgotten you.’ I would be happy with that, but there’s just been nothing. So I don’t know whether it’s imminent, or it’s been forgotten.’ (CEB, pg15)

- 3.4.2 Letters, emails or even text messages for some would be acceptable to reassure them. Participants felt that there was a need for a customer relationship management system that updated tenants quarterly on the progress towards planned maintenance, etc. and the reasons for any delay.

‘I suppose that can be relatively easy done with a computerised system where you can just put little three monthly churns out to say ‘sorry, we’ve not been able to do this, our finances have been difficult this year’ or whatever.’ (CEB, pg16)

- 3.4.3 Several participants related incidents where the delays they had experienced were due to contractor delay. In one instance this appeared to be due to lack of materials management and in others a lack of staffing to answer calls and to ensure follow up to requests for service.

‘Our central heating packed up in January. So we had no heating, no hot water, we phoned the contractors, they came out; ‘Oh, we’ve got a get a part for that.’ Left us one fan heater, and cleared off. I phoned them a couple of days later and said ‘Has this part come in?’ ‘No,

we're still trying to get it.' So I phoned the housing officer, who put me onto the maintenance officer. Half an hour later I got a phone call from the contractor saying that the part had come in. And he came in, went in and put it right with it. I said to him 'What, did you go to another supplier?' he said 'No I pulled it off the back of my van.' They'd got it all the ----- time.' (CB, pg6)

'When you phone the council, they will put you on hold and put you through to a contractor, who'll put you on hold for ages.' 'Yes, when they say they will do it on your behalf, they don't get back to you. You phone them, they say they will find out from the contractor, they don't get back to you. But that isn't the housing officer. That is the repairs team.' (CB, pg7)

3.5 IMPROVEMENTS TO INFORMATION/COMMUNICATION

- 3.5.1 To improve communications participants made a number of suggestions. Firstly they identified the need for more 'two way' flow of information with more contact initiated by the Council in order to keep people informed.

'At least a two way conversation; don't feel that it's just you all the time making the effort..' (CCH, pg24)

'Wouldn't have hurt them to have sent a letter saying 'your name's still on the list.' (CEB, pg27)

'They're very good at listening to feedback, but they're not responding to it. They're not acting on it. They're not implementing any actions following on from that feedback.' (CCH, pg24)

- 3.5.2 There was also a demand to know who their housing officers are and for some face to face contact with the individuals who are managing the housing service. As part of that development of relationships might occur with tenants then 'feeling valued'.

'I think that the council are more involved in local communities. Have somebody come and visit every now and then to talk about what's going on and how they can help.' (CEB, pg26)

'Understanding who is my housing officer in the Council, and to feel that I'm actually valued as tenant, would be nice.' (CCH, pg25)

- 3.5.3 As to the means of communication there were mixed views with several participants seeking text alerts, online communication, emails, etc. and updates being provided through the housing website. However others dismissed these due to lack of knowledge or lack of appropriate equipment, (computers, tablets, mobile phones etc.). There was a request for the main telephone number not being a 0845 number as this was said to be paid for by those who only had access to a mobile phone.

- 3.5.4 Opinions were expressed that the service provided by housing officers differed depending on the person providing the service and there was therefore a need to ensure consistency of service and attitude.

'It depends on the housing officer' 'Some will really go out of their way to help, and others, like you've just said, they just, 'Hurry up it's nearly my lunchtime' that's the feeling I get.' (CB, pg6)

- 3.5.5 Validity of information was also queried, especially in relation to the information given by contractors to tenants – in the instance cited whilst the job is in progress. In addition tenants spoke of times when they had received information after the work had been done – in one case a day after the work had been completed and in another receiving a message after the workers had left. It was therefore identified that not only is there a need for communication between tenants and the council and tenants and the contractors but also between contractors and the council.

'Once they're starting work I need to know what days they're coming, not sitting there two days expecting them to come, (Contractors). 'We're coming back tomorrow.' I've sat there two days doing nothing, couldn't go out in case one of them came. They don't inform you when they're coming.' (CB, pg11)

'But that is with the contractor, not the council officers? Or is it both?' 'I think it's both. Both are not communicating with each other. It's like a relationship, isn't it? And they decide well they're not... but I don't know, it's modern technology.' (CB, pg15)

- 3.5.6 Accuracy of information passed from the Council to contractors and to tenants was also identified as an issue that relates back to the need for a customer relationship management system that logs the customer information and requests that have been made.

*'I think also when you first ring up a report; 'I've got a complaint' or 'I need this job', you tell this person, and that person tells that person, and it ends up like Chinese whispers. And you've only got to put one word in the wrong place and the whole thing's out of context.'
.... 'you would have thought at the first point of contact they would enter that into a computer, and all the other contacts were just somebody pressing a button, and that information would flow through.' (CB, p16)*

- 3.5.7 It should be noted however that whilst this report highlights areas for improvement so that a picture of the 'ideal' can be formed, in general tenants were happy with the communications they receive and the way in which responsive and planned maintenance is handled.

'Last year the whole of my street had new windows, and we were kept, I think, quite well informed. It was all by letter, and we had several letters, and when they had to come to measure them and when they had to come to fit them.' (CEB, pg14)

3.6 INFORMATION FROM OPEN DOOR AND OTHER SOURCES - LEASEHOLDERS

3.6.1 Leaseholders though were less happy than tenants in respect of the information they receive. For several ‘Open Door’ was thought not particularly relevant to them with some suggesting that there should be dedicated sections of the magazine for them and others feeling that they neither needed nor wanted to receive information in this way. This is not to say that the publication itself was criticised, which it was not, simply the relevance to leaseholders. A selection of responses relating to Open Door from leaseholders is shown below.

‘As you said, it’s mostly focused towards the tenants, there’s not much information for leaseholder.’ (CL, pg3)

‘I really think it should be more in here for leaseholder, even though you’ve got the contact number to contact them, it should be more information for a leaseholder here.’ (CL, pg3)

‘I receive this magazine which I don’t really want. It’s not really relevant to me. I’d rather not have it. I’d rather they just respond to my emails.’ (CCH - leaseholder, pg3)

‘I am informed mainly by the Open Door actually, and occasionally by snail mail, neither of which I find particularly helpful because I would much prefer electronic communications.’ (CL, pg1)

‘I’m never quite sure how much relevance there is to it for my personal use. It’s quite broad-ranging and so sometimes there’s only a very, very small section of it which is actually relevant to me. But I think the publication itself is excellent. It’s mainly the relevance to me as an individual.’ (CL, pg2)

3.7 MEANS OF CONTACT – LEASEHOLDERS

3.7.1 A number of leaseholders attending the meetings did not live in the property they leased all of the time. Some had businesses abroad and others said they could not afford to live in their leasehold property and were letting it out and renting in the private sector. This made contact difficult with several reporting that they had expressly asked not to be contacted by phone or letter but only by email. For at least one participant this had not been adhered to.

‘I’m not always in the country, so if there’s something really urgent and I’m away on a longer trip, I don’t get it until after the event, so that’s problematic for me, and I have.... actually informed leasehold services and various members of the council a million times ‘please don’t write to me, please email me’, just doesn’t happen.’ (CL, pg1)

3.7.2 Other means of contact were, like tenants, direct face to face contact at Council offices, and by telephone. Again there appears to be some problems relating to response to messages.

‘And if I want to know anything I tend to pick up the phone, or I even go to City Homes South in Cherry Hinton Road.’ (CL, pg3)

'I've phoned up quite a few times, and I had no reply from them' (CL, pg2)

- 3.7.3 Several leaseholders had attended leaseholder meetings but these were criticised for the lack of information there, the lack of attendance by other leaseholders and the time of day they were held which potentially exacerbates the problem of attendance. The notice given for the meetings was also reported as being short, (two or three days prior), which also make it difficult for people to attend even if they wish to.

'I have also been to the leaseholders' meetings and stuff, and yeah, it's not great. There's not great amounts of information.' (CL, pg4)

'I don't go (to the leaseholder meetings) because I've been so annoyed about this, because I don't have the time to keep complaining, you know it's just like 'really? Do I have to keep doing this?' (CL, pg10)

'The leaseholder meetings tend to be you get two or three days' notice there's going to be a leaseholder meeting, so even if you wanted to, you couldn't make arrangements around that.' (CL, pg11)

'I've been to a few and there's nearly as many council people sitting on the top table as there are leaseholders. So perhaps if a few more leaseholders went... '.... 'But it would be good if they could hold those at better times of the day, because half of them you can't go to because they are during the day, and it is completely unrealistic.' (CL, pg11)

- 3.7.4 It was suggested that Facebook – the housing services now has a Facebook it was agreed - is a means of communication for leaseholders that could be used both to access information but also to identify where services were less than expected.

'I notice they've got a Facebook page now and I was thinking of going on there and saying 'hang on a minute, this is what's happened' and uploading photos, and seeing what sort of response I got from that, but I just haven't got round to it.' (CL, pg32)

3.8 KEEPING PEOPLE INFORMED

- 3.8.1 The timing of correspondence from the council relating to issues such as 'section 20 works', were sent too close to the events to allow leaseholders to respond it was alleged. This led the more cynical of the leaseholders to assume that this was because their representations were unlikely to change the course of events. There is therefore a need to assure leaseholders that the comments and concerns will be taken account of in the decision making process.

'The only letters you tend to get tends to be two or three weeks before the work starts so they're asking for observations which you can't get in a reply to before the work actually starts. And to be honest, it tends to be if you email them this is going to happen regardless of what you want to say.' (CL, pg3)

- 3.8.2 Other leaseholders identified access to information and advice to leaseholders difficult to obtain and that a number of issues about their leasehold was unclear.

‘However, I did contact leaseholder services several times by email. They do respond, but it’s very hard to get the information. I think there are a lot of unclear issues with the leaseholder advice and so on.’ (CL, pg3)

3.8.3 Unlike tenants the majority of leaseholders preferred electronic communications to paper or face to face contact. This, as expressed by one participant in the quote below is because the correspondence has a ‘trail’ and that the individuals who have been contacted and who have contacted them are identified.

3.8.4 Others however, similar to the problems experienced by some tenants, found it easier to visit offices to avoid the issues about being transferred from one person to another, having to repeat the information and the difficulties that arise when others are giving explanation as to the purpose of the call.

‘I prefer an electronic trail. I find it quite useful because then I know who wrote to me or who I spoke to, because I’ve got this trail, because if I don’t know and I go ‘oh, I think it’s the person who...’ and that’s just like hopeless, because nobody’s going to say ‘oh yeah, that was me.’ (CL, pg9)

‘If you go down and speak to somebody, I think nine times out of ten, they’ve forgotten what you were talking about anyway, by the time it gets transferred to the person to who’s responsible for this particular item.’ (CL, pg9)

3.8.5 leaseholders felt that the Council is ‘behind the times’ in the way in which information is recorded, and the communication skills of some of their staff. In addition the expectation is for 24/7 access to services which can only be met electronically. It was not clear from the discussion however if the current means of having such contact was not suitable for their needs or whether they were unaware of the opportunity to do so. There was however a perception that customers should ‘work to’ the time frames set by the council rather than those available for the customer.

‘But they do tend to be very behind. If their communication skills were better, I think they’d have a lot less problems and a lot less issues within Cambridge itself.’ (CL, pg11)

‘If they used emails a lot more frequently, the person could even be at home having his lunch answering his emails if he wanted to be.’ (CL, pg11)

‘Most places out there; supermarkets are open every hour of the day, a lot of the shops in the town centre are staying open later and later during the day, because they found it’s good customer service..... I’m not saying it’s necessarily just this council, it’s all councils, tend to work on the government mentality; that they’ll only answer questions in their time, when they’re at work, and that’s it. Whereas the rest of us are supposed to take time out of our lives to react to the council’s responses.’ (CL, pg11)

3.9 IMPROVEMENTS TO COMMUNICATIONS - LEASEHOLDERS

3.9.1 Issues which are unclear and require clarification include the responsibilities of the leaseholder and the freeholder and greater detail, rather than ‘superficial responses’, when information is sought. Some information given to leaseholders appears to have been erroneous in the past giving cause for concern especially when asked to pay considerable sums of money over short periods of time when this has not been expected.

‘I’ve had major issues with the council as my freeholder, and a lot of the issues are around whose responsibility is what, and that’s very unclear, even when I look at my lease, it’s still very unclear.’ (CL, pg5)

‘I would like to get more detailed information when I contact the council. They usually give very superficial information that ‘this is how it works’ or ‘this is how it’s done’, but they don’t give you any information of what can be done better.’ (CL, pg12)

‘I was told I’d have five years to pay it off. It was five thousand pounds. So recently, I went into the office just to enquire again, and they told me I’ve got a year to pay it off in monthly instalments, or make my own arrangements as she said. So that’s very different to what I was told to begin with.’ (CL, pg17)

3.9.2 It is possible that staff are not fully aware of the information when leaseholders pose questions. At least one leaseholder had experience of being passed on, without great success, to other members of staff and of being told that someone would come back to them but then had no further contact. The phenomenon of being told that someone would come back to them was so prevalent in the leaseholder group for this to be a relatively common problem.

‘Most of the time when you call them; ‘oh, I’m not sure what department. I’m going to find out for you. I’ll give you this number. I’ll call you back’ you know, it’s like you transfer from one person to the other to the other, and you can’t get anywhere, you have to keep calling them all the time. It’s not really great communication at all.’ (CL, pg17)

‘I’ve passed it to the relevant department’, and that will be the last I hear of it unless I come back to them.’ (CL, pg12)

‘The reason I get cross with them is because this precise problem of you phone up, you get passed from one person to another person, and by the time you’ve got to the tenth person you’re starting to feel a bit frustrated, and so you shout at them, wrongly I agree, but you know, there’s only so much you can take when you know you’ve been going round and round in circles all morning and wasting your time and wasting a lot of other people’s time it seems.’ (CL, pg18)

3.9.3 The requirement from leaseholders is accessibility – being able to make contact with the appropriate person, and accountability – knowing who will be responsible for a request or complaint and for taking this forward.

3.9.4 This apparent lack of accountability, i.e. an officer of the council taking ownership of the problem, was felt to have affected the relationship between leaseholders and the housing

service with some leaseholders believing that they may be viewed as ‘noisy complainers’. This perception of how they are seen may affect the relationship from the outset of any communications. It was suggested that a management chart showing who is responsible for what aspects of service would help customers understand who to ask for and who to direct questions to.

‘Accessibility and accountability. So in other words, they're easy to access, you know who it is you're going to be talking to, and when you talk to them they take responsibility for what you're saying. So accessibility and accountability.’ (CL, pg31)

‘I can imagine that from their point of view it's possible that they're seeing leaseholders and tenants as just this very noisy mass of complainers, and I think when you've got that... attitude, and then you've got leaseholders and tenants who don't really feel like they're being listened to, there's always going to be a disconnect.’ (CL, pg10)

3.9.5 Therefore a direct line and a named person to contact was thought essential to improving relationships and the service received.

‘A single leaseholder magazine with a direct phone number.’ (CL, pg31)

‘I mean the reason I get cross with them is because this precise problem of you phone up, you get passed from one person to another person, and by the time you've got to the tenth person you're starting to feel a bit frustrated..... there's only so much you can take when you know you've been going round and round in circles all morning and wasting your time and wasting a lot of other people's time it seems.’ (CL, pg18)

‘You never know who you're talking to if you ring and complain, you need to know who you're talking to, because that can take forever, believe me.’ (CL, pg30)

4.0 VALUE FOR MONEY

- Value for money – what is ‘good’ and what is ‘poor’ value for money?
- What is reasonable to expect?

Following the discussions about information and communications participants were asked to consider the concept of value for money both in respect of what they would consider to be ‘good value’ and how they would identify what is ‘poor value for money’. They found the latter easier to describe than the former but in doing so enabled the development of key aspects of value as perceived by tenants and leaseholders.

4.1 AFFORDABILITY

- 4.1.1 The affordability of the property in which they are living was of primary importance both in terms of the level of the rent and in respect of cost of running the property and access to local amenities from that property.

*‘It’s certainly, a good deal. Below market rent, commercial rent, especially in Cambridge.’
(CEB, pg18)*

‘Well, if you’ve got houses which are going to be eco-friendly and affordable, that would be ideal.’ (CEB, pg26)

‘We think good value is the actual rental, how much you pay for the property, that is good value, but actually, we’re both very happy tenants. We thought quality was about the housing being near local amenities.’ (CCH, pg19)

‘Well, what we pay is really good value for the Council for what we get in exchange for what we pay.’ (CEB, pg19)

4.2 EXCEEDING EXPECTATIONS

- 4.2.1 Cambridge City Council Housing was noted as ‘good value’ by providing a service which is over and above the expectations of their customers. Specific examples include, as noted earlier in the report, the efforts made to support people with disabilities or debilitating illnesses; the speed of response, especially to urgent requests; and the quality of the buildings in which the customer is living.

‘So they put in a wet room extremely quickly, which I was totally dumb founded by. They repainted the place too, which was amazing.’ (CCH, pg4)

*‘Can I just say, most of the service, I think is also fantastic. I’m very happy with them’
(CCH, pg18)*

‘I think that their response, when I need something done in the house, has been great. It’s brilliant.’ (CEB, pg18)

'I've phoned the council before about repairs, and when those repairs have been very urgent, they have always been very good. They would ask what exactly the problem was. I would explain it to them. Then they will say, 'We'll try to get a workman to come out to you as soon as we can. We'll call you back once we've found someone and we'll tell you how long they will be.' And sure enough, they would call me back in as good as ten, fifteen, twenty minutes tops.' (CB, pg9)

'Because I live in a wonderful flat, it's very good quality. When I have any trouble, any problem, they immediately come to me and they offer help, and I had the help I expect really. I cannot ask you for more. So I'm very thankful.' (CB, pg20)

'Well, all I can say is good. I've got a three bedroom house, lovely house, immaculate, and it's got a fantastic garden, everything's hunky dory. I had a specialised bathroom put in for my needs. everything with me's been hunky dory.' (CB, p21)

4.3 MANAGING EXPECTATIONS

- 4.3.1 In brief, and well described in the quotation below, value for money was said by some not to be exceeding but managing expectations – informing residents about what they can expect and keeping to that promise. Presentation of the properties and surrounding areas also plays a part in supporting the view that customers are receiving value for money.

'Managing expectations and meeting objectives really, and doing what they say they're going to do, and carrying out their promises. Making sure the place is clean, well presented, safe and secure. Making sure that it looks nice. Taking care of the estate. Cleaning it regularly. All those things really is value for money.' (CCH, p19)

4.4 GETTING IT RIGHT FIRST TIME/QUALITY OF THE WORK

- 4.4.1 Whilst many participants thought their current property and the service they received was good value for money, others used their negative experiences to explain the concept.
- 4.4.2 The quality of repair work and any repair being completed 'right first time' are key aspects of perceptions of value with a number of participants asserting that this was not the case. In one group participants were of the view that the Council always chose the 'cheapest' price for work and this in itself led to poor value due to the need to repeat the work.

'Nine times out of ten, you have to go back because something has not been done properly.' (CCH, p3)

'You feel sometimes that they always go for the cheapest option, which then doesn't end up being good quality, and then you end up having to keep repair, repair, repair.' (CCH, p17)

'Don't always go for the cheapest, because nine times out of ten, the cheapest isn't always the best.' (CCH, pg17)

- 4.2.3 Another group identified the appointment of a company ('Chaps') as an example of where work had to be repeated leading to a waste of, rather than good value for, money. The responsibility for the problems caused was said to be the Council (contracting department) rather than the errant company.

'They wasted money over the contract with Chaps. Sorry to bang on about them. Because Morrison's had to repair the work that Chaps had done, not just with me, but as they said to me at the time, 'you are not the only one by any means.' Now that's all extra money. That's wasted money. So somebody somewhere in that contracting department is not doing their job.' (CEB, pg21)

4.3 RESPONSIVENESS TO ISSUES/NEEDS OF CUSTOMERS

- 4.3.1 Participants identified instances where the Council takes cognisance of the needs of customers leading to a perception of good value for money. Participants cited the efforts made by staff to fit the needs of customers with examples such as 'avoid the school run' option for repairs and other flexibility added to the alerts of when the work people would arrive.

'They also can have an 'avoid the school run' option, because I go to the school to pick up my children, which is useful.' (CEB, pg8)

'On the general repairs, they're much more flexible..... . they will telephone you when they're on the way, and also I had one the other day where the repair wasn't due to be done until the afternoon, but at eleven o'clock in the morning, the person got a phone call and said 'look, I'm in the next street, the jobs I was doing are over quickly', or one person was out, 'I couldn't do it, can I possibly come to yours early?' (CEB, pg9)

'Well, they always try to fit you in at your convenience, not theirs. If you can't make the afternoon, they'll make a morning appointment for you. They are very flexible on that score.' (CEB, pg9)

- 4.3.2 There were negative aspects of the service provided that affected perceptions of value for money. These, relating back to information and communication, included staff not returning calls or needing to be 'chased' in order to conclude an issue or even to get action. For some participants 'lack of response' was in connection with repairs but for others it related to anti-social behaviour and the apparent lack of action despite the united concerns of neighbours.

'It's getting responses from people; it's very slow and I've already raised complaints about various matters and I'm still chasing people up about the same thing.' (CCH, pg3)

'Annoying thing is that we have a bit of a disruptive neighbour, and unfortunately, even though the other three flats have complained about this young guy, nothing gets done.' (CCH, pg4)

- 4.3.3 A potentially worrying case cited was one where a young female participant in the group was left in an insecure property despite having reported the need for repair and was subsequently burgled.

'In fact, the state of door was so bad that my house got burgled just before Christmas, and I wasn't surprised because the door looked vulnerable, and anyone could have simply pushed it aside and walked in.' (CB, pg3)

- 4.3.4 Leaseholders felt that their 'slightly different' (to tenants) needs were not always taken into account by the Council. An example was the changing of doors in one block with all tenants being provided with new doors. These were not offered to leaseholders who said they would have paid to have them provided and fitted.

'I think the Council need to consider leaseholders needs more as well, because there's only one or two leaseholders in the block, and the rest are Council tenants and they had all of their front doors replaced recently. It looks really nice and smart, and they didn't offer me... I would have paid, but they didn't offer me the option of having mine replaced too.' (CCH, leaseholder, pg14)

'They just need to deliver really on their promises. To try and meet their customers' expectations and consider those of a leaseholder. I know we all have slightly different needs, but providing value for money that would be good.' (CCH, pg25)

4.4 RESPECT AND COURTESY

- 4.4.1 Although most participants reported good relationships with staff a few instances of lack of respect or courtesy were reported during the groups. Needless to say this lack of respect affected perceptions of value for money.

'I've had council contractors come around and look at things, but the first guy was really rude and abrupt, and he could see that I was disabled, but he said I must clean my windows and clean the frames on the inside and things like that and getting all this unconstructive advice.' (CCH, pg4)

'If I'd have recorded that conversation and given that recording to the council, she probably would've been sacked, because she was highly inappropriate with what she said to me. She was quite threatening, and I didn't appreciate that at all. But of course, I have no record of this. It's purely my word against hers.' (CL, pg19)

- 4.4.2 Some participants felt they were not listened to by staff. The example cited was a leaseholder at a leaseholder meeting and relates back to previous comments in this report about the Council being 'good at listening' but not necessarily 'acting' on issues raised.

'They sit there with their little clipboards and they write things down and then they tell you what's going to happen, not what... they don't listen to the leaseholders to any great respect.' (CL, pg7)

- 4.4.3 There was also a perception that if individuals are considered to be 'troublesome', (i.e. making complaints or chasing up on non-completions); then they are treated differently to other customers.

'I know that they have a tendency to think, 'oh well, that's that person they've moaned at this before, we'll just put them on hold'. I do know that has happened.' (CCH, pg16)

- 4.4.4 One aspect of 'respect' is how tenants see themselves in relation to the Council. There was an element of 'supplicant' in this relationship, especially with tenants who are currently in receipt of benefits. Participants suggested that they did not demand from the Council because they are currently not paying for the property, (i.e. in receipt of housing benefit). The rents being below market levels also affects how tenants respond to the Council, with one group agreeing that because the rent is low they allow the Council to provide lower standards.

'I give the Council slightly more leeway than what I would if it was a private property.'..... 'Yeah, and I suppose that's why I do, to a point, let them get away with more.' (CCH, pg13)

'Well, because I'm on benefits for everything, I never have any complaints, because I'm not paying for anything in that way. So I'll bide my time for most of the time.... because I'm not paying for anything, I just feel like I can't complain about problems.' (CCH, pg17)

'I wouldn't feel that my house is on a par with perhaps the properties that were being rented out privately. So I accept things in my house that are perhaps not to the standard, because I know I'm paying a reduced rent, so I'm satisfied with that.' (CEB, pg20)

- 4.4.5 Leaseholders felt that there was no way in which any issues they had could be escalated if they had cause for complaint. Should they need to complain, or indeed if they had complained, their comments were simply relayed back to the people who had 'failed' them in the first instance.

'There's not much information on who you go to, you just have to contact the leaseholder services, which is basically the same people, there's no higher head, or chief executive or whatever to go to, I don't know. It's just the same people, the one number.' (CL, pg18)

- 4.4.6 Unlike tenants who seemed to feel an ownership of the relationship with their landlord, leaseholders felt more that this was a business relationship. This is something they regretted with at least one leaseholder feeling they were not treated 'like a human being'.

'I see it as more than a business arrangement. You know, I think that my freeholder has a duty of care as well, they have some responsibility towards me as a leaseholder, not just as a business arrangement, but as a human being, and often, I just don't feel like I'm treated like a human being.' (CL, pg28)

4.5 KEEPING PROMISES AND COMPLETING WORK

- 4.5.1 A number of tenants felt that they did not get value for money because promised work has not been started and in some cases started but not completed. This is particularly frustrating when work has been charged for as there does not appear to be a connection between finance chasing payment and the record of the non-completion.

'They haven't maintained the block, and everything they say they're going to do, they don't do and it's in disrepair and it's falling apart.' (CCH, pg7)

'I would have to pay five hundred and eighty pounds and they were going to be doing some repainting, something to do with the section twenty process. Then they arrived, started the job and never came back to finish it four years later. They write to me prolifically.'.... 'I was charged two weeks wages for work they carried out, and then four years later, it's still not been finished.' (CCH, pg10/11)

- 4.5.2 Promises to return to complete work which were not kept were cited in several groups. In addition a lack of clarity on service charges was a cause of concern. Several participants felt that the level of service had diminished and were unclear about what they should expect.

'I can't finish it today, I have not got the right parts, but I'll ask somebody to come...' and then I had to chase it up because nobody did actually come back, but I was told that somebody would be in touch with a view to a new appointment, and that didn't happen, so I had to chase it up.' (CEB, pg10 & 11)

'They used to do a lot of cleaning of the staircase and landings and cleaning bins, and putting the recycling bins out'. 'I meant to look up exactly what I'm paying for a week on maintenance, but it's a few pounds a week and I'm getting nothing for it.' (CEB, pg18)

'Had some work done three years ago. Work wasn't completed. I've already made two complaints. Work still not completed.' (CL, pg4)

- 4.5.3 Whilst, as noted above, most participants had positive experiences on appointments for service and repairs, a few had negative experiences of staff arriving earlier than the appointed time. Consequently the repair was not done and the request went to the 'back of the queue' through no fault of the tenant.

'If you're working full time and you've booked that day off and they come early, you've then missed them and you have to go back to the end of the queue again to wait.' (CCH, pg8)

4.6 PROVIDING THE RIGHT STAFF FOR THE JOB

- 4.6.1 Participants suggested that some repairs may take longer than others as qualified tradespeople are not as easily available as general handypersons. In order to ensure customers feel they have value for money it is important that the people sent to deal with their issues are recognisably competent and qualified to do the job.

'If it's a qualified tradesman that's needed that takes longer to arrange for someone to come out against a general handy man/builder. So someone more qualified does take longer.'
(CCH, pg9)

'To make sure that they've got adequate tradesmen that are going into the properties to do that job that they're trained to do and not sending a plumber to do a chippy's work. I have known that to happen.' (CCH, pg25)

- 4.6.2 The 'right staff' as described by participants, included staff appropriately trained when answering calls at the call centre and for the system to be broad enough for the general needs of callers to be included. Several participants had the experience of having to describe their problem more than once

'I just wonder sometimes who is actually at the end of the phone. Whether it's somebody who hasn't really got a clue, or if it's just somebody with a headphone on that's been given a programme book of process; this is what you've got to do, quickly read it.'... 'A script to read out.' 'they're asking what's wrong and what it is, you're trying to tell them and they look at their list and it isn't there. So then they have to put you on hold and trot off to somebody else to go and get the information.' (CCH, pg15)

- 4.6.3 Participants also felt that there was a danger that they were not receiving good value for money because contractors were overestimating the work they can complete in a given time period.

'The trouble is they take too many jobs on at a time, and they've only got a certain time to get so many houses done.' (CB, p13)

4.7 SUPERVISION AND MONITORING

- 4.7.1 Given the concerns expressed in the discussions participants concluded that project management, monitoring of work and supervision of contractors could be improved in order to increase value for money.

‘I think the project management is not always what it should be really. There’s nobody supervising them and checking they’ve finished a job and signing everything off. Checking for snags and defects. There’s no clear accountability there I don’t think.’ (CCH, pg10)

- 4.7.2 Examples of how lack of accountability impacts on customers included unchecked and unsafe kitchen units; confusion about the repairs requested and the adherence to the contract requirements by workers on site. This is particularly galling for leaseholders who are asked to pay for a service which they then do not receive. It was also reported that bills for leaseholders are presented some considerable time after the work has been completed making it difficult for recipients to recall any issues they have had.

‘The last tenant had put this lovely kitchen in and when my husband opened one of the doors on a cupboard on a wall, the whole thing just completely fell off the wall’. (CCH, pg10 & 11)

‘There’s a fault somewhere in the administration where they were getting half the information, because when he arrived I thought he was coming over for one particular thing, which he didn’t actually have on his documentation.’ (CB, p14)

‘We don’t know what information the council is sending onto the contractors. It’s whether the information is okay from the council and the contractors aren’t taking any notice of it, because they’re competing for a contract and they put in the lowest price.’ (CB, pg15)

‘Part of the charging in there was that they would use a chute to dispose of material from the roof to the ground, and that there would be three hundred and twenty five pounds for a skip which would be used.... all they did was drop the stuff from the roof to the floor, and another guy picked it up and stuck it on the back of a lorry. So I’m not waiting for the bill to arrive, which tends to come about six months after the work’s been completed, so that you’ve forgotten many of them.’ (CL, pg22)

- 4.7.3 Participants felt that by passing the work to a contractor the Council appeared to believe they had negated responsibility and that the responsibility for work completion to standard becomes the contractors. Whilst this is unlikely to be the case the process of how the Council monitors progress and standards is not clear to customers.

‘And we also feel the council should continue to follow it up, because at the moment they’re just passing the buck. Once they’ve got a contractor and they say they’ve given your job to a contractor, it seems they are happy to just sit back and say, ‘That is sorted.’ (CB, p15)

‘So it seems like there needs to be accountability for the contractors as well. And someone in the council is the contact for, and is making sure that all the work is done, and all the work is done to a high standard, and it’s good value for money, because there doesn’t seem to be that.’ (CL, pg21)

- 4.7.4 In addition costs for some activities agreed by the Council with contractors seem excessive to leaseholders.

‘Well, my four thousand pounds quote is to re-plaster two walls in my flat. Four thousand pounds. I could get it done for four hundred pounds if I get an independent plasterer in there.’ (CL, pg8)

4.8 KEEPING CUSTOMERS INFORMED/MANAGEMENT SYSTEMS

- 4.8.1 Updating customers is clearly very important to ensure that they do not feel forgotten or that their work is still on the list to be completed. Process for this included phone calls, text messages, emails, etc. dependent on the needs and expectations of the customer. Understanding of the priority system and where their particular job is would also assist in reducing frustration and increasing understanding of expectations which would have a positive effect on perception of value for money. This would apply even if work was held up as explanations for this would reduce the frustration of not knowing.

‘To be updated regularly and not have to chase people constantly, because that’s frustrating, stressful and it’s time consuming. So just somebody having the courtesy to send you a quick email once a week, or pick up the phone to just let you know where they are with the ongoing process. It would be helpful. It would take the frustration away.’ (CCH, pg11 & 12)

‘They’ll say ‘okay, well we’ll get back to you’ and they don’t. And so I have to chase it up, and ‘oh well, this is because so and so has to speak to so and so, who has to get a report from so and so’, ‘okay great, well just email me when I’ve got that.’ (CL, pg5)

‘Wouldn’t it be better for us to know what the priority is and dates of what you’re working towards? You’re thinking there’s some poor person who’s had their bathroom ceiling fallen in, but actually, we don’t know.’ (CCH, pg13)

‘It would help to manage our expectations if we had better communication and explanation for things. There’s often delays and reasons why they can’t do something, but if we know why, we might understand better.’ (CCH, pg13)

- 4.8.2 Participants suggested that there was a lack of recording of requests and the customer relationship management system did not provide appropriate information when customers make contact. The expectation is that the system would easily identify the address of the person calling and the most recent request for service would be available without the customer having to repeat it.

‘You’ll ask them to do something and they’ll say, ‘right, okay’, and a couple of weeks later you still haven’t heard anything. So I usually end up phoning them back again. Then they’ll turn round and say, ‘when did you report it?’ I’m thinking, ‘you should come up with my name and address’ (CCH, pg16)

- 4.8.3 Clarity relating to responsibilities of tenants and leaseholders was mixed. Some tenants and leaseholders felt they were updated and understood their responsibilities and what they could expect from their landlord. However others clearly did not and in the main these were

tenants and leaseholders of longstanding. In addition leaseholders felt less well informed that tenants about who is in a similar position to themselves. This in part may be due to mixed tenure when there are tenants and leaseholders in the same block as where the whole block is single tenure evidence was given that showed significant joint working is possible.

'There doesn't seem to be co-ordination. We do hear about leaseholder meetings, but I wouldn't have a clue. I mean, I know there's one other leaseholder in my block, but I don't know how many other people around me are leaseholders, and I've got no way of contacting them and they've got no way of contacting me.' (CL, pg13)

'I think, in general then, we need to get more information of what is the responsibility of the council as a freeholder, and what is our responsibility.' (CL, pg24)

4.9 CONSISTENCY AND FAIRNESS

4.9.1 As noted above some participants felt that they were now being asked to take responsibility for things which they have not been informed about and had previously been the Council's responsibility.

'I don't think they list everything in the handbook that they've now decided is the tenant's responsibility.' (CCH, pg21)

'Four or five years ago, I was told the issue was going to be dealt with at their expense. Now, four or five years later, they're asking me for four thousand pounds to resolve a damp issue, which I'm pretty sure is not of my making.' (CL, pg5)

4.9.2 One aspect of service which participants felt was 'not fair' was the renewal of kitchens when the tenancy changes hands rather than for tenants who have not moved. This suggested that the Council 'cares' more about new than longstanding tenants.

'I know they change kitchens as the tenant leaves ready for the new people who come in.' 'To me it should be when you're living there really, they should do it. Not caring about tenants who have been there a long time.' (CEB, pg13)

4.9.3 The balance between the Council and the customer is weighted towards the Council it was suggested. An example is if a tenant needs to cancel an appointment they are 'automatically sent to the bottom of the list'. However when appointments are cancelled by the Council it was asserted that sometimes the customer is not even told.

'The thing is though if you cancel an appointment with the council, they will make it take longer. But if they cancel an appointment with you, you don't even get told..... And if someone has got to go to work and you book that day off, and then you're sat there waiting for them and then they don't turn up. But yeah, if I don't keep an appointment, I'd have a letter about it saying I'd been wasting their time and things like that.'

4.9.4 Some leaseholders even feel bullied by the Council at least in part due to the split between finance and the checking and agreeing that the work is completed.

‘So as a leaseholder I had to pay the contribution to the works, and it wasn't completed, and it was three, four hundred pounds.’ she's like ‘oh no, it's nothing to do with us’. But she was the one that was chasing for the money, so yeah, that's my experience.’ (CL, pg4)

‘I think they'd say ‘our legal department will squash you in a second mate.’ Because look at the legal clout that they have, you know, you're just a little mosquito buzzing around their ear. You know, they just slap you away basically.’ (CL, pg28)

4.10 CONSULTATION

4.10.1 Participants who were leaseholders strongly argued the case for more consultation and discussion about the works to be carried out. Even given previous success in changing the minds of officers in respect of a specific job the work involved in achieving this made them disinclined to continue with further involvement. Nevertheless there does appear to be a demand for greater input into the decision making process on the services received.

‘And we actually reduced the cost by fifty percent by having a leaseholders’ meeting with the council, which they don't usually follow-up.’ (CL, pg3)

‘When you try to communicate with them, it tends to be ‘well, we've got to do it because we're the council and it's our responsibility and we're not listening to you.’ The leaseholder meetings, yes, we did get a good response on one of them, but to be honest, it's like going to the dentist having your teeth drawn, you know, they again come with the attitude that ‘we are the council, we'll listen to what you're going to say and then totally ignore you.’ (CL, pg7)

‘We are paying for maintenance and so on. It doesn't tell any detail of what really is being done. Just maybe cleaning, they will cut the grass and that's it, but you don't have a choice, say if you pay ten pounds more, are you going to get roses planted in the garden? You know, if you pay more, are you going to now get nice fruit trees? I don't know what the options are.’ (CL, p13)

5.0 WELFARE REFORM

- Awareness of Welfare Reform
- Preparedness for welfare reform

5.1 The tenant and leaseholder survey that took place the previous year showed a lack of awareness of the implications of changes to the welfare system and this lack of awareness continued with participants in the focus groups despite the fact the groups were held on the day of the Chancellor’s Budget and the expectations that this event might have concentrated people’s minds.

‘It definitely will be changed after today.’ (CEB, pg22)

5.2 Of course a number of participants would not be affected due to their not being currently in receipt of any benefits and this was the case for all of the participants in the leaseholder group who initially assumed that only tenants might be affected.

‘The spare room subsidy doesn’t really affect anyone as a leaseholder because it’s only tenants that it affects, because they get their housing benefit..... so it really doesn’t affect us as a group. Maybe the working tax credits and things may affect some people, especially if they’re single parent families, or people that are stay at home mums, or even dads nowadays.’ (CL, pg29)

5.3 Initially the debate for some participants assumed that because nothing had affected them to date little would change and for some, even if it does they were going to ‘worry about it when it happened’.

‘I haven’t had any noticeable changes in a negative way.’ (CCH, pg21)

‘My daughter has special needs and she gets benefits, and as far as we know, nothing is going to change or anything at the moment.’ (CCH, pg22)

‘I’ve still got that attitude ‘well, I’m going to cross that bridge when I get to it.’ (CCH, pg22)

5.4 Others were quite nervous about how things may alter in the future but unclear about the detail of how it might affect them.

‘I’m expecting it’s going to come, but I don’t know what, when, and how.’ ‘They’re bringing it in stages now instead of all on the one day.’ ‘It is a worry certainly.’ (CEB, pg22)

‘I’m quite scared when I land up on that (Universal Credit).’ (CCH, pg22)

‘Well, I suppose uncertainty as to what is going to change, I just feel the government, you know, what’s been in the news, and the budget today, that things are changing, but until we know what and how it affects us as individuals, I suppose it’s just you’re not quite sure what’s going to happen. So I suppose, that in itself, I suppose, just makes you worry slightly. Then, as it comes, depending on what it is, we’ll just have to go with it.’ (CEB, pg23)

- 5.5 Participants assumed that support and funding is currently or should be available from the Council and advisors who can assist. Participants advised that information should be made available through Open Door. Several participants felt that they would have no idea how to seek assistance should they require it.

‘There is funding and support available, isn’t there, through the Council? People can come and support you if you’re on benefits.’ (CCH, pg22)

‘There should be something in the Open Door that addresses these policies, because a lot of people... myself, although I’ve never needed it, hopefully won’t, but I don’t even know where they are.’ (CEB, pg25)

‘I would say with the welfare changes that are coming through, that the council keep us updated and informed and supported as the changes come through.’ (CEB, pg26)

‘I think that more support should be available to people that don’t have knowledge about things that are going on that are going to affect them.’ (CB, pg32)

- 5.6 One participant pointed out that information had been advertised in Open Door that had been helpful relating to the need to open a bank or credit union account and that individuals would need to apply on line but few others had noted the article, presumably because they had felt that this would not affect them. The presence of food banks in all parts of the City and the initiative ‘food cycle’ was also brought to the attention of one group, again as issues where participants were generally lacking in knowledge.

- 5.7 The cost of marketing and publicising the changes from Council budgets was a factor for some participants who believed that the Council would use the opportunity of some tenant’s misfortunes to bring properties back into the market.

‘I don’t think they will, because of money, marketing, advertising, and also they want the property.’ (CB, pg30 & 31)

- 5.8 Many participants were disturbed about the effects of direct payments to tenants of housing benefit on tenants who may find it difficult to manage their budget. That this was now not a matter that the local authority can change was firstly difficult for participants to understand and secondly a worry that many people would find themselves in financial difficulties.

‘But some people, no matter how much you try, they’re just not going to manage.’ (CEB, pg23)

‘There are a lot of people who need a roof over their heads, and they don’t need to be taught how to handle their money. They’re having a hard enough time already as it is.’ (CEB, pg26)

‘I don’t think that is a good idea. Look at how many people that might think one time, ‘Oh I’ll use that pay it, and put the money back’ and they don’t, and then they lose the property.’ (CB, pg28)

- 5.9 In order to ameliorate the problems participants felt some tenants might experience, it was suggested that the Council should identify individuals who they feel may fall into arrears as early as possible to support them prior to problems becoming acute.

'I think they kind of know really the people who are going to get themselves in a situation where it's going to free up a lot of houses, isn't it really, if people are getting evicted, but then they're just going to need more hostels.' (CB, pg28)

'By helping people as soon as possible. If they're having the slightest financial difficulties, giving them help rather than wait the two months, not speak to them at all, just send them a letter saying you owe and that's it, then you're evicted, you owe two months' rent. They should give people more.' (CB, pg30)