

# Ethnic Minority Voices in Tenant Engagement Case Study





# Case Study



## Boosting Confidence and Strengthening the Tenant Voice – Fairoak Housing Association

### Overview

This case study reflects on how Fairoak Housing Association has been strengthening inclusive engagement for people with learning disabilities and autistic tenants. Over time, and through the continued development of a dedicated Tenant Board, The Owls, and a closer working relationship between tenants and the Fairoak Board. The organisation has gradually created opportunities for tenants to influence how their homes and services are run.

As a team, we have always placed strong values on building positive, respectful relationships with our tenants. We take time to understand individual communication preferences and work hard to ensure that tenants are supported to make choices and decisions about their own homes and daily lives. This person-centred approach has provided a strong and trusted foundation.

However, being involved in wider organisational and strategic decision-making is new for many tenants. This work has therefore focused not only on creating opportunities to contribute, but on gently building confidence, skills and accessibility so that tenants feel able and confident to shape services in a significant way.



### Purpose

Fairoak Housing Association is a specialist supported housing provider dedicated to providing high quality, safe and bespoke homes for adults with a learning disability and autistic people. We provide supported homes for 115 tenants across Cumbria, North Lancashire and County Durham and Northumberland. Some tenants have complex needs, including communication difficulties. Many have had little to no experience of being genuinely asked for their views or confident that their opinions truly matter.

For some, past experiences at school, in workplaces, or within other services often meant that decisions were made on their behalf rather than with them. Therefore some tenants were initially hesitant to speak up. A lack of confidence, shaped by not always being heard in the past, meant that some did not expect their views to influence outcomes. Building trust took time, patience and consistency.

The challenge was not simply about inviting tenants to meetings. It was about nurturing the confidence, skills and self-belief that would enable them to step into new spaces. Our ambition was never just to “consult” tenants, but to walk alongside them as they developed the confidence to lead conversations, shape discussions and influence decisions about how the association operates.

## Objectives

The aims of this work have evolved over time but include:

- Supporting and upskilling tenants who are interested in being, or who are currently, members of The Owls.
- Working towards having a tenant member on the Fair Oak Board.
- Developing meetings so that tenants genuinely influence how the organisation is run.
- Ensuring meetings and board papers are accessible and easy to understand.
- Supporting tenants to take real ownership of their meetings and agenda-setting.

## Approach and activities

A range of practical and relational steps have been taken to build confidence, structure and sustainability.

## Training and development

Tenants participated in formal training delivered with Tpas, including:

- Chaining Skills.
- Meeting and Committee Skills.
- Running a Successful Residents Association BNCHA.

This training helped to demystify governance, giving tenants more structure and a sense of legitimacy in their role. It was strengthened by ongoing mentoring from the Customer Engagement



Officer, who provides encouragement, support with meeting preparation, and reflective conversations afterwards. This consistent, wrap-around support has been crucial in helping tenants process their experiences and continue developing their confidence.

## Leadership development

Initially, tenants elected a Chair who was supported by the Customer Engagement Officer. As their confidence grew, tenants agreed that future Chairs should be selected through an interview process. Interested tenants applied and were interviewed by outgoing Chairs, with support from both the Customer Engagement Officer and the Chief Executive.

This process led to the appointment of Co-Chairs, a model that has proved highly effective. It enables shared responsibility, mutual encouragement, and collaborative agenda planning. It also eases pressure on any one individual and models the kind of partnership working the group values in practice.





## Improved meeting structure

Tenants requested more structured meetings. In response:

- Agendas are co-developed with tenants.
- Agenda items include guiding questions to foster thinking and discussion.
- Papers are simplified and presented in accessible formats.
- Fidget toys are available, and tenants are free to move around the room if needed.
- Cards are used to signal when a tenant has a question or has a point to add to ensure everyone has a voice.
- Meetings have a time-limit of one hour and thirty minutes to support focus and wellbeing.
- All meetings are supported by the Customer Engagement Officer.

These adjustments, suggested by The Owls, have made meetings feel safer and more manageable, helping tenants to prepare and contribute with greater confidence.

## Broad Representation

Tenants with a range of support needs are all involved. Ensuring a range of lived experiences has strengthened the quality and depth of discussions during meetings.

Throughout this work, inclusion has been intentional rather than assumed.

Adjustments are regularly reviewed and adapted, based on tenant feedback.

## Outcomes and impact

Although this journey is ongoing, the impact is already visible.

## Participation & Engagement

- Increased attendance and consistency at Tenant Board meetings.
- Broader representation across different housing types.
- More tenants expressing interest in getting involved.

## Confidence and Skill Development

- Tenant Board members are leading discussions.
- Co-Chairs are confidently managing agendas and supporting one another.
- Tenants are asking thoughtful, structured questions and offering constructive challenge.

## Cultural shift

Meetings are more accessible and inclusive, but more importantly, there has been a shift in mindset. Tenants are increasingly seen, and see themselves, as contributors and decision makers rather than passive recipients of services.

## Tenant empowerment

The most meaningful change has been a shift in expectations. Tenants now expect to be heard and they are.

## Lessons learned

### What worked well:

- ✓ Investing in formal training gave clarity and confidence.
- ✓ Ongoing mentoring provided reassurance and continuity.
- ✓ The co-chair model strengthened peer support and resilience.
- ✓ Structured agendas with guiding questions made discussions more accessible and less overwhelming.

### Challenges:

- ✓ Building confidence cannot be rushed; it requires patience and consistency.
- ✓ Accessibility is not a one-off adjustment but an ongoing commitment.
- ✓ Developing meetings to make them accessible for those with communication differences.
- ✓ The co-chair model strengthened peer support and resilience.
- ✓ Structured agendas with guiding questions made discussions more accessible and less overwhelming.

### What helped:

- ✓ Clear leadership commitment to genuine tenant influence.
- ✓ Consistent and trusted staff support.
- ✓ A willingness to adapt processes in response to tenant feedback.

### Supporting Material Available:

- Accessible board paper templates.
- Agenda templates with structured questions
- 'I have a question' cards.

## Next steps

Fairoak remains committed to embedding this work. Next steps include:

- Continuing tailored training for current and future Tenant Board members.
- Progressing towards appointing a tenant member to the main Board.
- Developing additional, bespoke, accessible communication tools for all tenants.
- Sharing learning with peer organisations to promote inclusive practice more widely.

The long-term aim is cultural change, where the tenants have the confidence to lead their own meetings.

## Evidence and data sources

### Engagement Metrics:

- 115 tenants eligible for involvement.
- Tenant Board representation includes independent living, shared ownership and supported living tenants.

### Qualitative Evidence:

- Positive tenant feedback about feelings listened to.
- Increased tenant-led agenda items.
- Staff reporting improved confidence in communication.

## Alison Barnes

Customer Engagement Officer

alison.barnes@fairoakhousing.co.uk

07817 643492





T: 0161 868 3500  
E. [info@tpas.org.uk](mailto:info@tpas.org.uk)  
W. [www.tpas.org.uk](http://www.tpas.org.uk)

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    [tpasengland](https://www.instagram.com/tpasengland)



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