

A new card game is helping older tenants rate their service
 Photography and words by *Lydia Stockdale*

Play your cards right



Stacking the deck: residents at Housing 21's Lisbon Place examine the card game

Need to Know: tenant participation

Effective resident involvement and consultation in sheltered housing: a good practice guide for providers and commissioners, which was published in 2010 by the Communities and Local Government Ministerial Working Group, revealed:

- Resident satisfaction and well-being increases as a result of effective involvement. It leads to a greater sense of 'ownership' by residents and staff
- Staff job satisfaction increases as they work with residents to achieve results
- Listening to residents' feedback supports work to improve services and explore and plan future needs

- Sheltered residents have mobilised effectively against developments they have not felt consulted about, for example, Barnet residents' high-profile protest over the removal of wardens in sheltered housing which ran throughout 2009. The publicity and legal challenges that can follow such protests are a powerful illustration of the effects of not involving residents effectively
- Tenant involvement and empowerment is one of the six national standards imposed under the Tenant Services Authority's regulatory framework for England, which came to force in April 2010

The weekly coffee morning at housing and care provider Housing 21's Lisbon Place scheme is usually finished by 11.30am, but on the Wednesday we visit 13 residents have stuck around to play cards with *Inside Housing*.

These leaseholders, who live in Newcastle-under-Lyme, Stoke-on-Trent, have been known to play a game of bridge or two in their residents' lounge, but on this occasion they're playing with an all together different deck of cards - they are the Elderly Accommodation Counsel's housing for older people awards cards.

Designed to gather feedback from people living in retirement housing and residential schemes offering care support, the card game asks players to

score their housing provider on four aspects of their living environment: where we live, home, services and lifestyle. The scores given by residents determine whether their scheme will walk away from the EAC's annual awards ceremony as winners.

'We wanted residents to tell us about the environment in which they live and about the facilities and services they use,' explains Alex Billeter, project manager at EAC, and the man who designed the game. 'Residents are often subject to lengthy satisfaction surveys, which they complete on their own and may struggle with. We asked ourselves "how can we find an enjoyable way for them to provide us with information?'. The card game was the answer.'

The majority of the Lisbon Place



residents who volunteer to show us how the game works have played twice before - Mick Bird, their court manager has entered their scheme into the EAC awards the last two years. It has made it to the charity's award ceremony, winning 'silver' certificates, on both occasions.

Following suit

This year 400 schemes entered the awards and around 3,500 residents played the card game - it sounds like a lot, but the EAC wants to see more people playing the game as a way to get tenants involved in shaping their services. 'We would very much like for it to be used as a routine resident consultation tool,' says Mr Billeter. 'We feel the result would be better this way - the possibility of winning an award means residents sometimes boost their scores.'

It's clear that the leaseholders at Lisbon Court enjoy playing the game. They're split into three groups of four or five and are ready to start. Manager Mr Bird gives them a quick reminder of the rules and stands back. 'Of course the manager doesn't take part,' he says - one of the game's instructions is that staff members make themselves scarce, as residents need to feel free to discuss the subjects on the cards openly.

The residents shuffle the cards and place the pack in the middle of the table. A team captain is chosen and they look after the group score sheet in addition to their own score sheet. Working clockwise, players take it in turns to pick a card from the top of the pack. If it's a 'discuss' card, they talk about the statement on the card together, for example: 'We are con-

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sulted when it matters, and our views are taken into account'. They come to a consensus about whether Lisbon Place should get a score of 'yes' 'mostly' 'partly' 'no' - two teams give a 'yes' while the third marks 'most of the time' on its group score sheet.

If it's a 'do not discuss' card, all players are asked to tick their individual score sheet without a conversation - 'Some people are hesitant to criticise, others are very strong-minded and may influence others,' explains Mr Billeter. However, there's a constant murmur of opinions being sought and gained throughout this particular game.

Upping their game

Finding 'a range of ways for residents to get involved ensures providers capture the input and reflect the diversity of the greatest possible number of residents', is one of the recommendations given in *Effective resident involvement and consultation in sheltered housing: a good practice guide for providers and commissioners*, which was commissioned by the Communities and Local Government Ministerial Working Group, and written by the Centre for Housing Support and the Tenant Participation Advisory Service, last year (see box, Need to Know: tenant involvement). 'Informal, scheme-based and social opportunities are important, particularly for frailer residents,' it says.

Lisbon Place's Mr Bird agrees with this point. 'If you have a meeting to ask people [what they think] it's very difficult to get some people to talk. It can be overwhelming for them. If you have to hand out a straightforward questionnaire, it will end up in the bin,' he says. 'The questions in the cards are designed to extract the information and the residents see it as a bit of fun.'

In order to get as many of the 34 leaseholders at the 30-unit scheme playing the game for the scheme's most recent

entry into the EAC awards, he held a cheese and wine evening.

'You're always going to get some residents who are difficult to get on board,' he says. 'Doing it on a night like that encourages those people.'

EAC's Mr Billeter says that the game provides residents with an opportunity to open up and talk. 'For example, one of the cards asks them about the way their apartments are designed, and one person will say, "It's very good", and another will argue, "But you said you can't bend down to reach your fridge". It helps people reflect on how their scheme really works for them.'

If housing providers request the card game, the EAC sends it to them for free. The charity has a computer system which analyses residents' scores and can produce reports on the results for £120 per scheme.

It takes the Lisbon Place residents about 25 minutes to complete their card games - but they have played before. And they have some suggestions on how it could be improved.

Tom Emery, 82, would rather the score be given on a numerical scale - 'that way we get an exact figure,' he says. Sheila Bungenaar, 68, meanwhile, says that the scoring system doesn't allow for detailed-enough feedback. Sue Clewes, 65, however, says that whole point is that the game makes you talk.

'It's certainly different to talking about football,' says Brian Mifflin. 'Or who has gone to hospital today,' chips in Mr Emery. 'We call this God's waiting room,' adds his wife Sylvie Emery, 76. 'Do you? We don't,' says a shocked Ivy Tomlinson (pictured left), who at 90 years old leads the residents' weekly keep-fit session. 'We've got a long time to go yet.'

'I think we've got a good chance living here,' agrees John Bungenaar, 68: positive feedback indeed.

 For more on tenant participation, visit www.insidehousing.co.uk/needtoknow