

National Scrutiny Group Report

Customer Experience Committee



REPORT	
Report Title:	Grass Roots Engagement Scrutiny
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For Decision <input type="checkbox"/> Debate <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Information <input type="checkbox"/>	
Summary:	An investigation into the ways in which Accent facilitates opportunities for customers to shape and influence service delivery at a 'grass roots' or local level.
Appendices Attached:	Corporate Strategy Survey, August 2020 Residents Engagement Strategy Survey, October 2020

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1. Background

The NSG decided to investigate how Accent facilitates opportunities for customers to shape and influence service delivery at a 'grass roots' or local level. This scrutiny was chosen due to the publication of the Social Housing White Paper in November 2020 and its requirement for landlords to continually improve the way they engage with social housing tenants, to tailor their engagement appropriately to ensure residents are heard and to ensure they receive a high level of customer service.

A survey carried out in 2016 showed that 64% customers were satisfied that 'Accent listens to views and takes them into consideration'. However, this fell to 51% when we asked the same question in 2020, showing the importance of investigating this topic.

The NSG has previously investigated specific aspects of customer engagement and satisfaction for example; [Grounds Maintenance](#), [Fire Safety Communications](#) and use of [MyAccount](#), but has not specifically investigated how Accent sets out at a corporate level how it ensures its service delivery at a grass roots level is taking into account the needs of customers.

2. Methodology and Evidence Gathering

The NSG examined evidence from a range of sources to arrive at their conclusions.

1. Interviews were conducted with several members of staff across the business, including:
 - Amy Bower - Extra Care Manager (Barrow)
 - Chris Garlick - Customer Partner (Central Peterborough)
 - Gavin Houghton - Customer Partnership Manager (North East)
 - Kat Wilson – Customer Partnership Manager (South)
 - Lewis Holloway - Resident Engagement & Scrutiny Consultant
 - Lorraine Ticehurst - Customer Partner (Kent & West Sussex)
 - Mark Foster - Customer Partnership Manager (North West)
 - Vinny Watkins - Customer Partnership Manager (Yorkshire)
2. Existing insight was reviewed:
 - **Corporate Strategy Survey, August 2020** – this survey showed that customer satisfaction in Accent listening to views had fallen by 13% between 2016 and 2020
 - **Residents Engagement Strategy Survey, October 2020** – this survey was carried out in response to the decline in customer satisfaction revealed in the Corporate Strategy Survey, with the aim of understanding more about this element and what Accent needed to improve on.
3. A brief review was carried out of recent grass roots engagement activities.
4. A desktop research exercise was undertaken into what 11 other housing providers were doing in relation to customer engagement.

3. Findings

3.1 Interviews

The findings from the interviews had several themes:

- a) **Communication with residents:** COVID-19 led to the need to reduce face-to-face contact, and although a partial picture was gained via distanced engagement methods such as telephone welfare checks, not all customers answer the phone or call back. Some customers may have communication difficulties or preferences that make telephone calls difficult. Some customers prefer online communication, others don't.

Welfare check templates were used to aid calls during the COVID-19 pandemic, but the nature of templates is that they are rigid and these were reported to have been much more useful when the checkpoints were incorporated into a more general conversation. This was much easier where there was an existing personal relationship prior to the pandemic.

Satisfaction surveys can give a partial picture, but far more feedback is received from 'garden fence' conversations with customers on-site. Customers are much more open with what they really think when they get to know staff - it then becomes a two-way relationship. In short, face-to-face contact is important for building relationships.

Furthermore, it can be difficult to get a cross-section of views through consultations and questionnaires. Some reasons for this include; customers feeling more inhibited when committing their opinions in writing, customers not wishing to take part or customers not having the means to do so. Questionnaire design can also influence what customers can actually provide feedback on.

In some regions there is poor communication between contractors and Accent, which leads to a negative perception of Accent and complaints which staff have to deal with, distracting them from the grass roots customer engagement activity that is expected of them.

It was felt that Accent are generally poor at communication and need to follow up and feedback to customers in an open way.

- b) **Complaints:** The causes of complaints need to be understood. Complaints should be handled in an open way and treated as an opportunity to learn and improve.

Many complaints stem from issues such as waiting for contractors to carry out repairs and fly-tipping. It has been suggested that a cost-effective way to cut down on this and improve satisfaction would be to have a 'handyperson for a day' on schemes to take care of lots of small jobs that build up, and to have a regular cage van for customers to dispose of their unwanted items. However, the true cost of this would need to be considered as well as how that cost is apportioned.

- c) **Staff:** Despite some of the negative experiences and difficulties encountered, it was apparent from interviews that staff have a very good work ethic, are creative and passionate about giving good service to all customers, irrespective of their tenure. There is enthusiasm, however the support and training they need to carry out their roles well is not always forthcoming.

It was suggested by one interviewee that perhaps all regions could follow the lead of the South region in appointing a Customer Partner Trainee, through CharityWorks trainee placement. This scheme provides high quality graduates who are also following a leadership programme.

Customer Partner Trainees are able to do a lot of engagement work and deal with the less complex anti-social behaviour issues and complaints, which affords them valuable

experience and frees up time for other staff. This could possibly lead to permanent employment as the trainee would gain extensive knowledge of how Accent works and what is required of the role of Customer Partner.

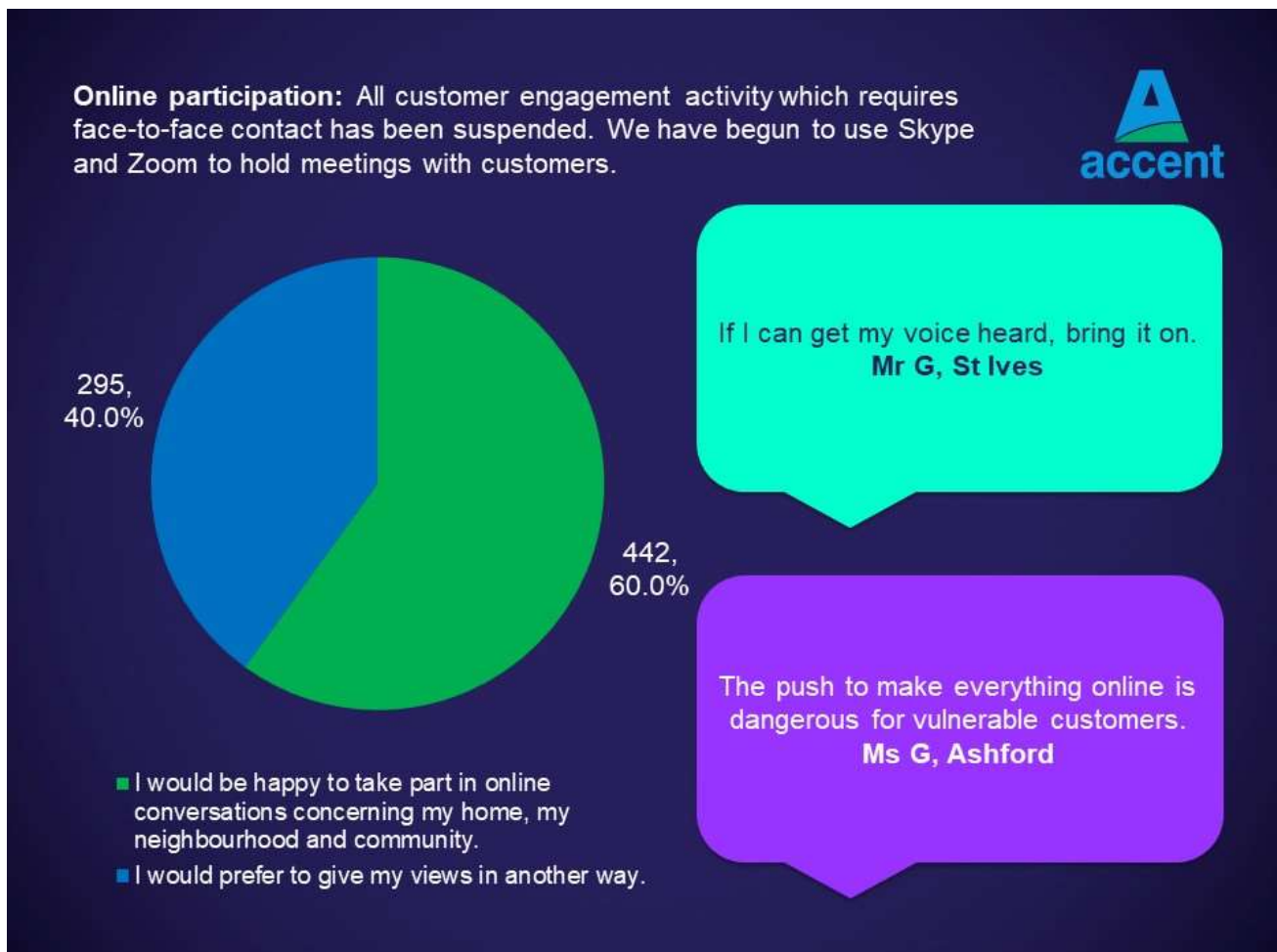
It was apparent that residents like to see staff around on the schemes and having the opportunity to build relationships in this natural way helps with communication. It would be helpful if staff were more visible when on the schemes. A return to scheme 'surgeries' (outside of office hours for those who work) where customers can pop in to chat to staff, air concerns and generally build a constructive two-way relationship would be beneficial.

- d) **Multi-agency working:** Some staff have found that COVID-19 has provided more opportunities to be included in multi-agency working and as a result they have made far more contacts from other agencies giving them a much bigger toolkit with which to carry out their role for the benefit of all residents. It was clear that where multi-agency is in operation, it is working well.

3.2 Existing Insight

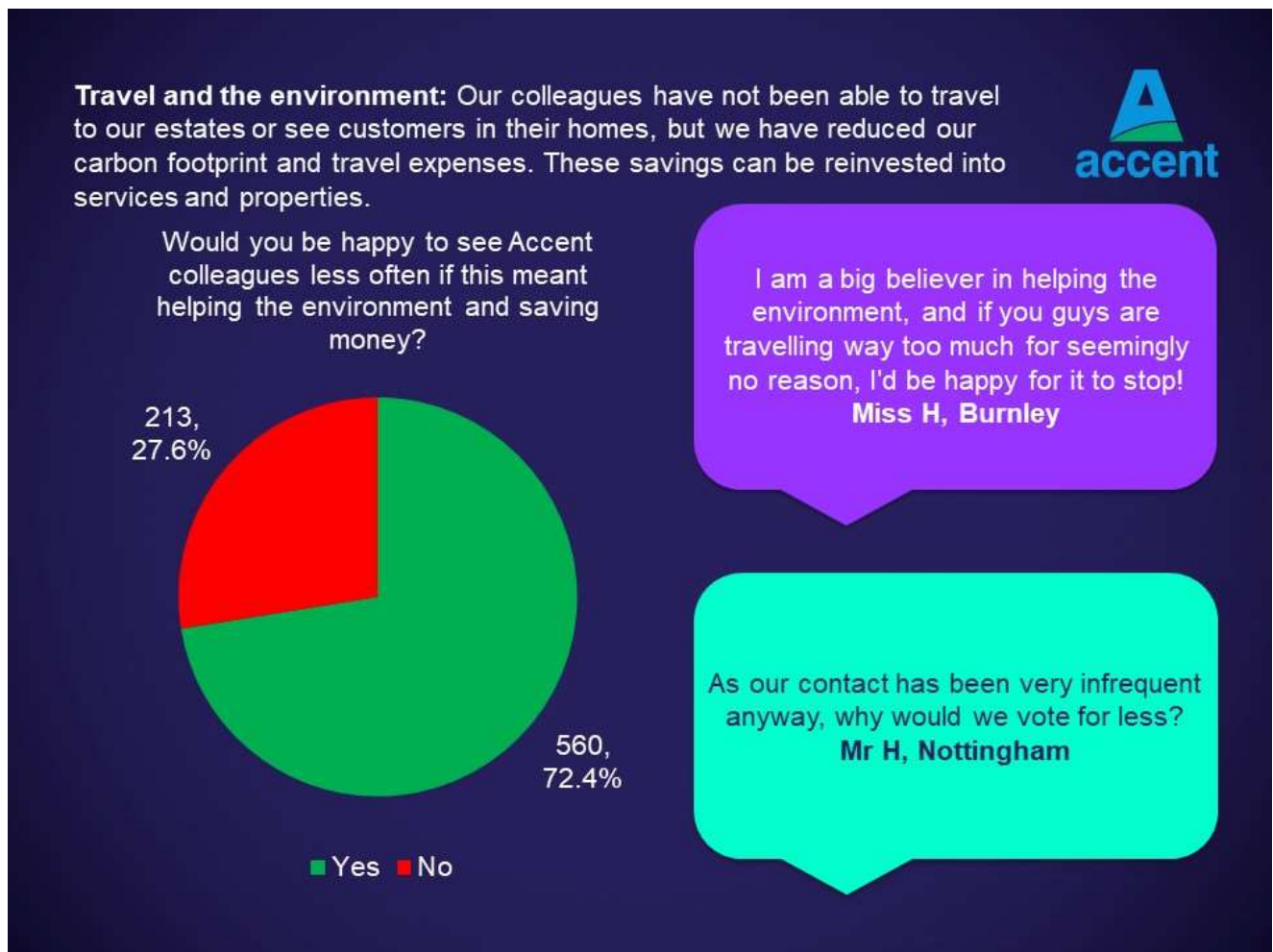
The Corporate Strategy dated 2018 stated an aim to be with 'customers for their journeys'. A survey was carried out in August 2020 to get feedback on changes made since 2018 and to inform the next 3-Year Corporate Strategy. Residents were generally supportive of reduced face-to-face contact as long as contact was still made and they were kept updated, although homeowners and older people expressed a greater desire to see staff.

In terms of face-to-face engagement activity, 60% of residents were happy to do this via video meetings instead.



However, the timing of this survey means it is likely that this question was answered in relation to COVID-19 ways of working rather than the preferred long-term solution.

In general residents were supportive of less staff travel if it would have definite environmental benefits, or the money saved was put back into services. However, some customers indicated they did not see staff much anyway and these benefits could also be seen with good journey planning. Many comments focussed on a need for more communication and listening to customers.



In October 2020 a survey was carried out on progress against the Resident Engagement Strategy 2017. This survey revealed that customers felt that engagement had actually declined since 2016; with less communication and response from staff, declining satisfaction with maintenance, Accent having become de-localised, fewer local staff and less sense of interest in local issues.

Respondents wanted more grass roots engagement, more local news and updates, more specific and timely response to feedback, suggestions and complaints, and communication to meet the needs of those who are digitally comfortable as well as those who are not. Customers felt that they did not see improvements as a result of their feedback and also wanted to be kept informed when Accent could *not* act on their feedback

In 2016, 64% customers were satisfied that 'Accent listens to views and takes them into consideration'. This fell to 51% when we asked the same question in 2020. Why do you think this has happened?



2020 has been a very difficult year re COVID... There has also been a change in the Partner/Housing Officer role that may have had an impact on residents' views.

Miss A, Blackburn

Accent's resistance in scrutinising grass roots problems. Not everyone believes in online surveys and their given scrutiny...

Mr M, Wakefield

At times it's not easy to contact the person you need to speak to. I've found on leaving messages, calls are not returned. This was before COVID.

Mrs L, Middlesbrough

Because in that time there have been incidents where residents have made repeated complaints about services, and been totally ignored. That was my experience, maybe others had it too.

Mr H, Cambridge

Because you don't listen and bulldoze through unacceptable changes.

Mr W, Windlesham

Complacency from Accent possibly. Job pressure - too much for Accent workers and/or shortage of staff or service providers i.e. contractors etc.

Miss K, Peterborough

Decline in appointments or face-to-face contact with Housing Officers etc.

Miss M, Camberley

Long-standing staff disappearing will unsettle tenants. Changing companies who do the repairs can also unsettle.

Mr L, Peterborough

I think a lot of the decline is down to the unsatisfactory management and poor contractors which residents are paying for and not getting satisfactory service.

Mr D, Leeds

3.3 Recent Grass Roots Engagement

Analysis was carried out of 275 separate examples of resident engagement activity provided during a 15-month period between 30 July 2019 and 16 April 2021. The analysis looked at whether there was variation in engagement activity by different areas and it was noted that only 25% of overall engagement came from East and South regions. There may be several possible reasons for this:

- Dispersed housing stock. Accent may not have strong relationships with local authorities in areas where they have a smaller presence, leading to less opportunity for partnership working.
- Lack of admin support for arranging events, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. This would include support for mail-outs, raising purchase orders, hiring premises etc.
- The varied nature of the role means some Customer Partners may have their time taken up with ASB, complaints about repairs and estate services, leaving less time to engage with residents on other issues.

These observations could equally apply to all regions but were specifically alluded to in our conversations with staff from the East and South regions.

3.4 Other Housing Providers

A desktop exercise was carried out to see what resident engagement activity was apparent from 11 other housing providers' websites. This showed a wide variety; some housing providers have basic customer panels such as scrutiny and complaints panels, whilst others offer a lot more with some good ideas that Accent could consider, including:

- A personalised approach
- Local newsletters
- Engagement for youth via a Junior Warden project
- Activities and competitions to bring neighbourhoods together
- Community grants and investment
- Joint walkabouts for customers to highlight areas of concern
- Staff visibility via uniforms
- Excellent accessibility options on the website - one provider included over 100 languages on their website via an embedded Google Translate button

4. Conclusions

Whilst during the COVID-19 pandemic personal contact has had to be reduced by necessity, this period has also highlighted that maintaining distanced relationships is much more effective where there is a pre-existing relationship. There is no substitute for staff being visible on the schemes and building relationships with customers. Staff being more visible and identifiable would be helpful. Customers would like to see Accent staff available at flexible times including outside of office hours. There is a place for technology, but the personalised approach remains most important.

A relationship is a two-way process and openness is needed to have customer conversations that garner honest customer views, especially when handling customer complaints.

Customers generally feel that Accent has become too centralised and more localisation would help customers to feel that Accent is invested in the community and by extension its customers.

Engagement should be more consistent across the country. There will always be differences in regions for a number of reasons, but strong attempts should be made to bridge this gap. Other housing providers have a range of initiatives that Accent could look at for ideas; the most interesting ones of these are community-focussed.

Staff are keen, creative and willing but have a very varied role with many priorities, so do need more support from the organisation to give their best.

Enabling staff to develop better relationships with local authorities can lead to more multi-agency working which improves outcomes for customers and raises Accent's profile.

5. Recommendations

The NSG's overarching recommendation is that interaction and engagement is encouraged between staff and customers as a two-way process. Specific recommendations to achieve this are listed below.

	Recommendations	Strategic Priority	Response	Service Area Manager	Target	Measures for success
1	<p>Improve access to quality information to help customers participate in consultations and be involved in decision-making processes. Ensure it meets high accessibility standards e.g.:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Other language options • Website accessibility 					
2	<p>Improve staff visibility and presence. e.g:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Branded uniforms such as fleeces and polo shirts (a lanyard is not visible enough) • Staff photos displayed around buildings • Staff to keep residents informed on their availability and when events are taking place • Keep customers informed about staff changes 					
3	<p>More opportunities for customers to meet staff face-to-face e.g:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Evening meetings and open surgeries. • More flexibility around customer engagement opportunities. 					

	Recommendations	Strategic Priority	Response	Service Area Manager	Target	Measures for success
4	Choose the most suitable engagement methods for engaging with customers based on the profile of residents living there.					
5	Better promotion of customer engagement activity so that customers know their views have been heard.					
6	Practical support to help customer-facing staff with simple fixes e.g. access to handyperson.					
7	Scheme Engagement Days/Repairs Days. See local engagement highlight here . (Easthorpe Court).					
8	Reintroduce the role of Customer Partner Trainee in all regions.					