
INCREASING MEMBERSHIP INVOLVEMENT

The Benefits of Membership Involvement

It's common enough for tenants' groups to want more membership involvement. It usually stems from the feelings of a few people being left to do it all.

So what positive benefits come from wanting to involve as many people as possible? Here are some:

- ☺ The group becomes more democratic
- ☺ The group might have more clout
- ☺ More ideas and opinions are available. This could lead to a better case for something you want.
- ☺ The more people, the more work the group can do. In other words, more can be achieved.

Apathy

Why don't more people get involved? The first answer usually offered is "apathy". As an explanation, this doesn't get us very far though. In this handout more positive ways to understand the problem are attempted.

Three Key Ideas

The rest of this handout considers three key ideas:

Achieve results

People like to be associated with something that is successful. If the group can achieve results for the area it represents, the status of the group grows. Then more people will want to be associated with it.

Turn people on

If people can get some satisfaction or even enjoyment from working in a group, they will want to keep doing it. They will also attract more people.

Don't turn people off

On the other hand, so many things can put people off working in a group. They can drive people away.

Let's examine each of these key ideas in turn.

Achieving Results

Of course achieving results is not easy. Why?

Sometimes groups take on a bigger issue than they can cope with, and end up getting bogged down. Would it have been better being less ambitious and making the aim easier to achieve? People are rightly sceptical about influencing authority. But it can be done. It is really helpful, when a new issue comes up, to be able to recall past successes, however modest. It reinforces a positive feeling about the issue you are about to take on.

Sometimes a group doesn't focus clearly enough on its aims. What in general is the group in business to do? What particular things are you trying to do at the moment? Your answers to these questions should be quite clear. If not you're in a muddle or drifting along.

Sometimes you get caught up in things others want your group to do. But does your group really want to get involved?

The starting point for achieving results is to

- ☺ take on things you judge you can succeed with;
- ☺ define clearly what it is you're trying to do (the whole committee should be clear);
- ☺ don't let others side track you.

When the group achieves results, make sure the folk in your area know about it, and that the group gets the credit due. This is one of the functions of newsletters. If an AGM or other public meeting is taking place, make sure the groups achievements are mentioned.

Success breeds success. A group that can feel the satisfaction of achievement will want to take on more. You will find it easier to draw more people in when they see a successful organisation at work. No one will be itching to join in if you repeatedly fail.

Turn People On

How do your committee meetings run?
Are there clear agendas?
Are things business like or sloppy?
Are different views treated with respect?
Is everyone given a fair hearing?
Are the decisions taken clear and well supported?
Do you try hard to achieve unity?

Another handout to complement this one describes the basics of good organisation. Use it to check how well your group conducts its business. Well organised groups are usually well respected.

When decisions are taken, the next step is to share around the work. So often groups take decisions then assume the secretary or chair will do everything. What should happen is a discussion of the tasks involved in carrying out the decision, and a sharing around of these tasks. No one need be left to do it all. Most people could get fairly easy jobs.

Let's take an example. Say your group decided to press for new sink units to be installed in the houses in your area. One person might be delegated to write to the Council to ask about its policy on sink replacements and whether any other areas are getting this done. Some others might be delegated to visit their nearest neighbours to assess the condition of sinks and see if the case for replacement is strong and well supported by neighbours. Yet another might be delegated to write to the local press to let them know the group is taking up the issue.

The point being stressed here is not how to deal with this particular issue. It is to highlight how the jobs can be shared around. Teamwork it's called!

There is another angle on sharing work around. If the group has a lot on, sub groups can be set up to accomplish single tasks. Depending on the task, a neighbour may have a skill or experience that would be particularly helpful. You might be able to draw in such a person to help with the particular task. Their experience of working with the committee may be enough to draw them into it later on.

Remember, some people may be keen on certain things but not others. For example, a person might be keen on helping with a bingo night but less keen on attending a meeting on local government reorganisation. Try to find a niche for different peoples' interests.

Groups who last a long time and have a healthy committee more often than not include social activities in their work. It adds continuity to the group's profile in the area and can be great fun.

Folk in the area will appreciate being kept in touch with what your committee are doing. Newsletters from time to time could do this. You don't have to go overboard with these. Something simple and short regularly is better than a work of art done only once and never repeated.

If a particular important issue is on the go, use it to draw more people in. For example, if you had a public meeting about the issue you could ask for some volunteers to take on some simple tasks.

Annual general meetings are another opportunity to draw more people in. The formal business of an AGM is dull to most people. But it's an occasion where you want a decent turn out. Add something to the event. An interesting speaker could be invited. A lucky number draw could be held. Snacks could be served. The AGM could also be combined with a social activity. The main thing is to add something of interest to the occasion.

Don't Turn People Off

Imagine you are going along to a committee meeting for the first time. You don't know anyone. You don't know what the committee is doing. You don't know how the committee operates. You're shy about speaking up. The same old faces dominate the discussion. It's enough to put you off going back.

Ways are needed to make new people feel welcome and valued. Take time to welcome new people, and make introductions. If you know in advance a new person is going to attend the committee, an experienced committee member could perhaps arrange to call by and the two could go along to the meeting together.

Another fear some new recruits might have is believing they have to be more knowledgeable than they are. This lack of confidence may be misplaced, but can be felt strongly by newer people. Show an interest in the point of view of new people, and a respect for it.

If your committee's conduct and behaviour at meetings is a bit of a shambles, you'll most certainly drive people away. If your meetings are not well run, get training. Meetings are harder to run well than you might think.

A common "turn off" at a committee meeting is to thrash a subject to death. When a well rounded discussion of a topic has taken place, don't keep going over it, make your decision and get on.

Another way to kill off interest in your group is to overdo fundraising. You don't want to give your community the idea that that is all you do.

Occasionally, the personalities of some committee members clash. While tact can keep this low key, sometimes the clash just cannot be resolved and someone has to go. Personality clashes allowed to go unchecked can too easily destroy the whole group.

Another type of personality that destroys groups is the ego tripper. The activity of the group is built round this person's craving for status and esteem. We all want recognition and acceptance, but the ego tripper goes too far. A variation on this is the person who is too fond of the sound of their own voice, and fails to recognise the value of the contributions of others.

Conclusion

It will be apparent from this handout that there are lots of reasons why groups might fail to attract more active participants. Hopefully you are convinced that "apathy" is not a detailed enough explanation.

On the other hand, this handout raises practical issues that groups and committee members can try to do something about.

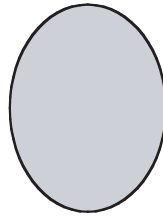
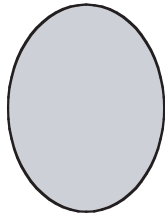
You need to assess your own situation and see what makes sense for it.

Reasons why people get involved

The meetings are well managed

The group picks up on the major issues

It fits into their current priorities and other demands



It is easy to get to and considers special needs

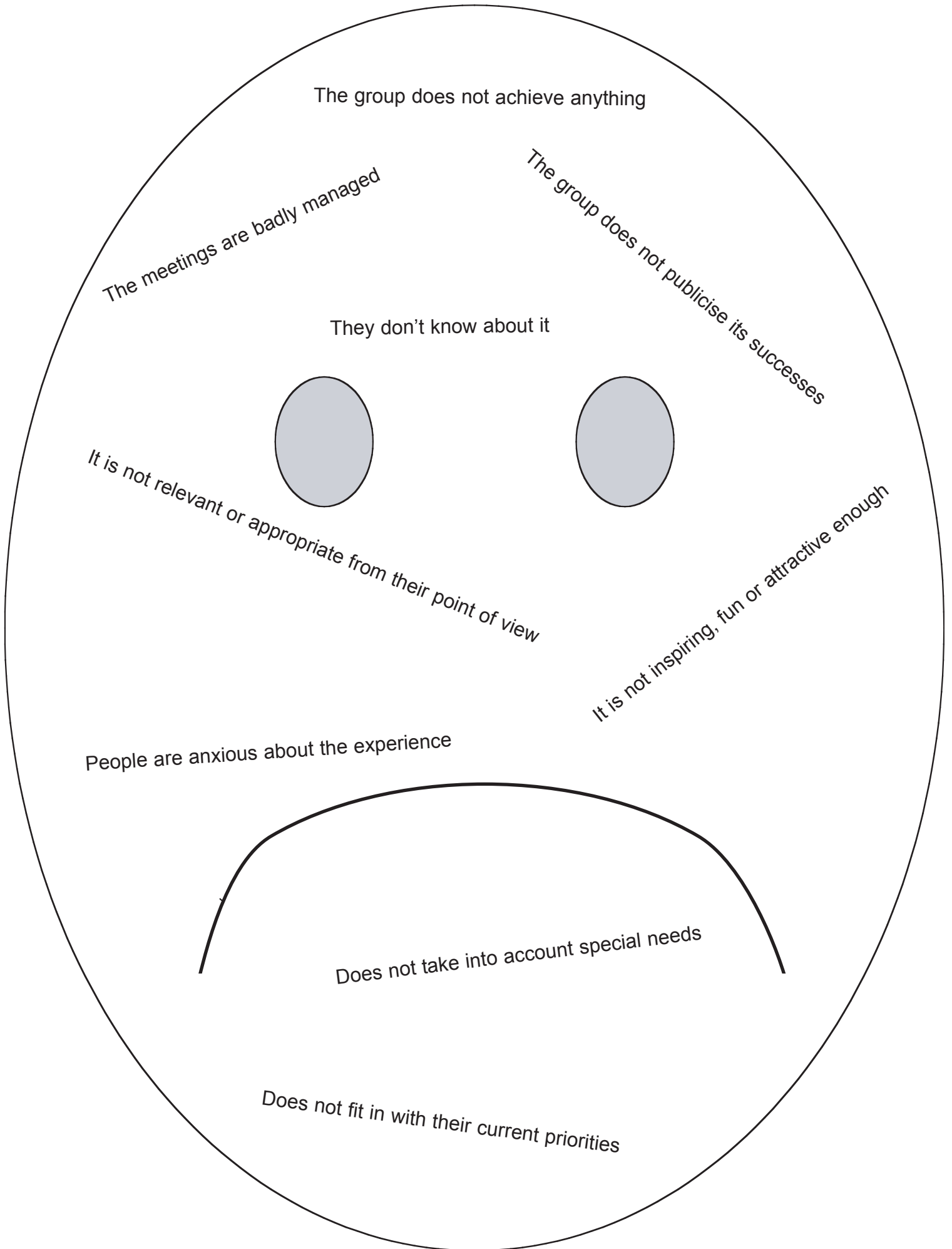
The group is successful

They know about it and know they can join/attend

Becoming involved is inspiring, fun and attractive

The group publicises its successes and keeps in touch with its members

Reasons why people don't get involved



How well is your group doing at keeping its members? Please ✓ the box that most to your group

		We do this	We don't do this	We could do this better OR we some-times do this
No				
1	Our meetings are well run with agendas, minutes and clear group decisions being taken.			
2	Our discussions seem to go round in circles and we never get to the point			
3	We expect new members to take on a lot of new tasks			
4	We welcome new people to the meeting, and make sure an experienced committee member takes an interest in them			
5	We update the new member with information and explanations, to help them catch up			
6	Our discussions at the meeting are dominated by one or two individuals			
7	If a disagreements happens in the meeting people leave feeling bitter or resentful			
8	We handle disagreements in a respectful manner			
9	Our meetings are held in comfortable surroundings			
10	We find that our meetings get bogged down with administrative matters, and no sense of getting anywhere with the issues coming up			
11	New members are asked if they could help with easier tasks			
12	We have procedures in place to ensure that no member spends their own money			

How well is your group doing at keeping its members? Checklist continued

		We do this	We don't do this	We could do this better OR we some-times do this
No				
13	As a group we recognise and publicise our successes			
14	As a group we are not very good at recognising our successes			
15	We do not regularly advertise our successes			
16	Our committee works well as a team, with tasks being equally shared out			
17	One or two people seem to do most of the work for our group			
18	We take time to identify tasks for new members and ask them about their interests			
19	We are clear about what we are trying to achieve, prioritise our work and have judged that we are not taking on impossible tasks			
20	We have taken on a lot of issues all at the same time without prioritising and can sometimes get sidetracked by individual issues			
21	Our meetings are fun, interesting and attractive and we look at new ways of making meetings even more enjoyable			
22	We take steps to find out what the majority of people think are the key issues for our area			
23	We consider and discuss special needs at our meetings in case new members need childcare, have a disability or another special requirement			
24	Our general meetings are widely advertised so that people know about them			

Building Membership. Barriers for people becoming involved in your tenant group.

This table is designed to assist you develop positive action points for getting more members. In the first column are a list of issues that could be considered. In the second column there is space for you to write your suggestions for positive action points to build membership.

Goals(things to aim for to assist building membership)	Possible actions that your group could do or could do better
Teamwork Ensure that everyone has a chance to contribute, decisions are made jointly, tasks are shared, new members feel recognised and valued etc	
Having fun Make the experience of being involved inspiring, fun and attractive.	
Well run meetings Make meetings inspiring, clear, short and an opportunity for everyone to be involved	

Venues and practical arrangements

Make meetings accessible, and consider special needs. Also ensure members do not have to spend their own money

Success

Stick to the group's aims. Take up the relevant major issues for the community. Set realistic goals. Do not be over ambitious. Publicise your successes

Communication

Ensure people know about the group, that they can join/attend and what is expected of them

Time management

Be flexible to make opportunities for people with different demands. Try to assist with the pressure of other demands e.g. childcare

National Research on building membership.

Introduction:

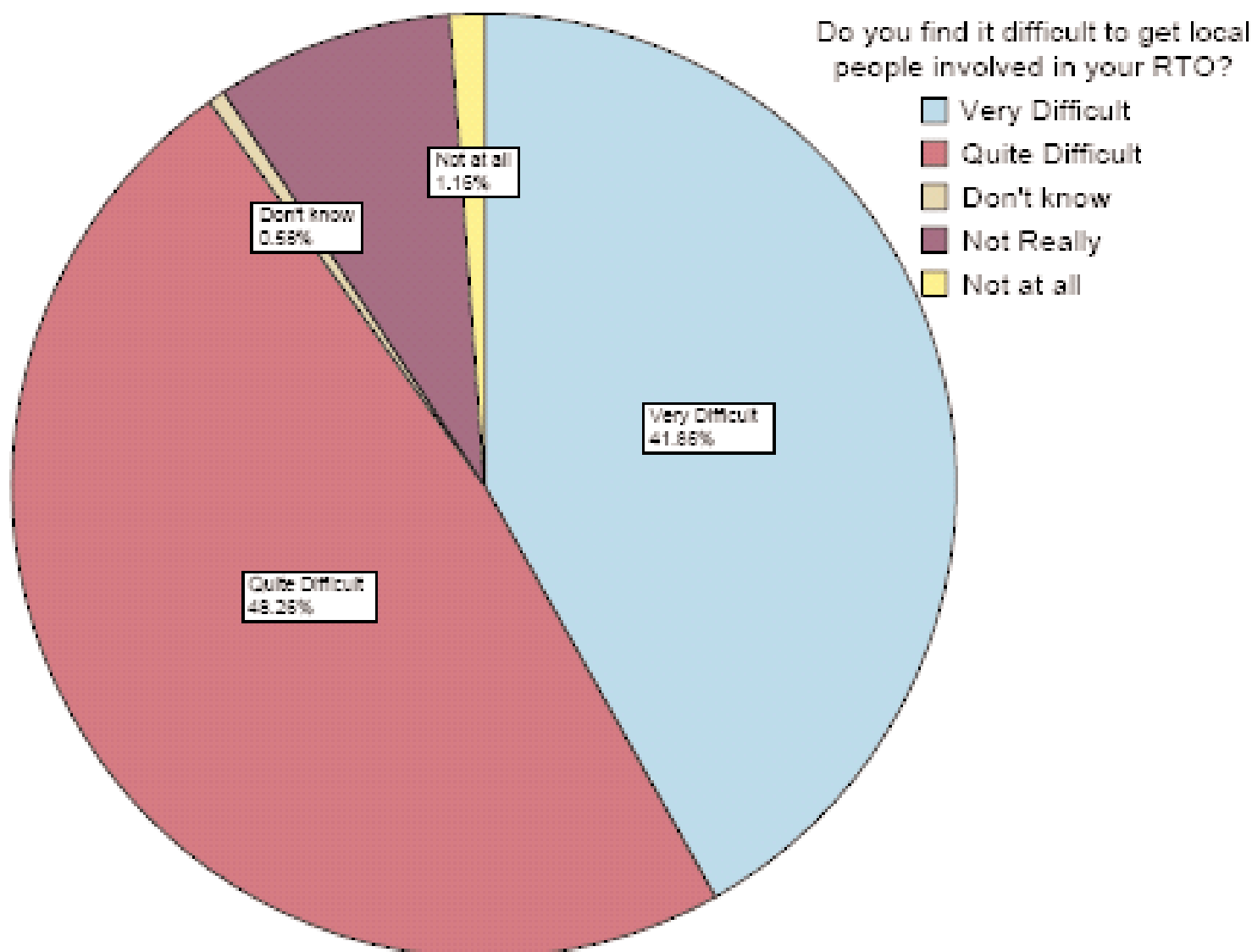
This information is an extract from a Communities Scotland report called "Engaging with tenants nationally – a consultation study". The study was done by Docherty Consulting Limited and published in March 2006. Copies of the full report can be got from the communities Scotland website.

(http://www.communitiesscotland.gov.uk/stellent/groups/public/documents/web_pages/pubcs_013476.pdf)

Questionnaire reference Q6 – Do you find it difficult to get local people involved in your RTO?

Figure 7 shows that the majority of RTOs (90%) reported that they find it difficult to get local people involved in their RTO. The results also show that only 8% of RTOs do not find it a difficult task.

Figure 7 Local people involvement in RTO



Observations

- ☹️ Nine out of 10 RTOs find it difficult to attract new people to participate in RTO activities. This clearly poses a major challenge for the future of the RTO movement. This notwithstanding it is highlighted earlier in this Report that many RTOs are longstanding. In addition nearly one in 10 appears to be quite successful in attracting new RTO members. These two issues offer the opportunity at regional level to discuss experiences and share best practice. In addition the responses to Q7 and Q8 below offer a further useful starting point when this topic is discussed.
- 😊 There is an opportunity to put in place an effective and meaningful RTO engagement structure, which can have, over time, a positive influence on Scottish Executive policy setting. This may offer a longer term opportunity to promote awareness of the relevance and importance of the Regional Networks to the RTO movement and in turn to local people.
- 😊 The issue of tenant and owner membership status, highlighted earlier in this Report is an important one in the context of RTO sustainability. If it is agreed to review and provide guidance on membership status then the ability of owners to engage in RTO activity may impact on RTO membership numbers and therefore long term RTO sustainability.

Questionnaire reference Q7 – how do you overcome lack of interest or desire from local people to be involved in your RTO?

Figure 8 shows the response made by RTOs to how they encourage individuals to get involved in RTOs and stay involved. The comments made by RTOs fell into three distinct categories with one additional respondent stating that they didn't know how this could be done.

From Figure 8 we can see that of the 110 responses to this question:

- ★ 35% of comments related to communication;
- ★ 34% related to making the issues on the agenda relevant and interesting; and
- ★ 30% related to getting the tenants and residents more involved in the process.

RTOs also provided information on methods that they have adopted in order to encourage involvement. RTOs were also asked to provide information on what methods have worked for them and which haven't. A selection of comments regarding these methods were:

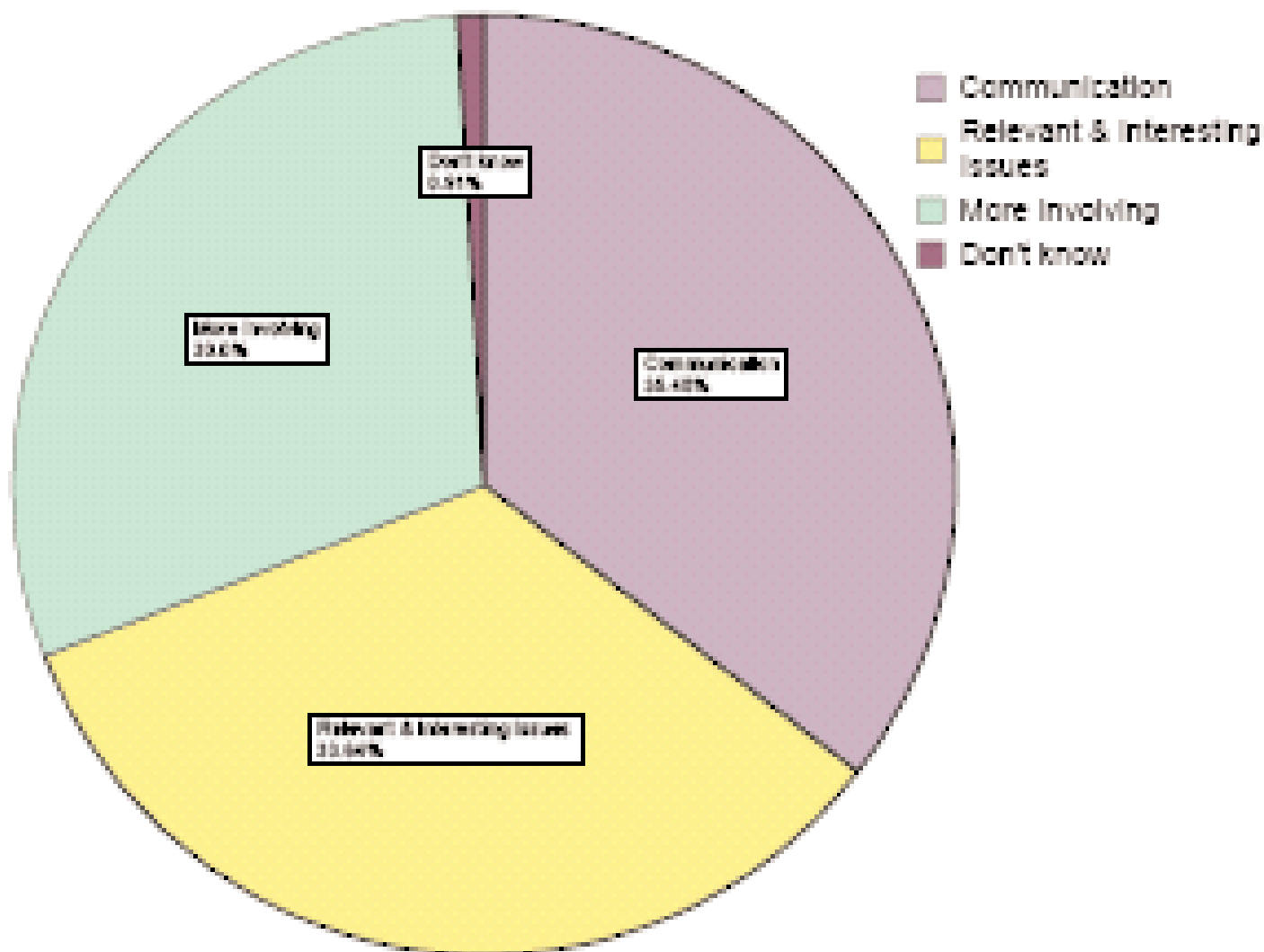
Methods that have worked

- ✓ (When) People feel their input has changed something for the better and (they) are more willing to remain involved;
- ✓ Creative methods such as bingo nights and social evenings etc... as a way of getting people involved locally;
- ✓ Involving young people encourages families to get involved and interested; and
- ✓ Clearly presented information and relevant issues.

Methods that have not worked for RTOs (to increase their membership)

- ✗ Door to door(contact); and
- ✗ Letters and newsletters.

Figure 8 Overcome lack of interest or desire



Observations

- ✦ RTOs have introduced a number of ways to overcome lack of interest, which are worth discussing in detail during the regional set up process.
- ✦ Traditional methods such as cold calling and newsletters do not appear to be effective, whilst combining RTO business with an attractive social event seems to work for some. The idea of trying to encourage young people to become involved as a means of raising wider family interest is commended and may also be worth exploring in reverse.