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# Retrofit

Engaging the hearts and minds  
of social housing tenants.





## Abstract

If registered providers (RPs) are going to meet 2050 net zero targets, engaging the hearts and minds of social housing tenants will be crucial in the retrofit process. Our hypothesis is that tenants want energy-saving updates to their homes, but are unsure about the process and technology, so we conducted what we believe to be the largest national tenant survey about energy-saving technology.

Our findings indicate that retrofitting is having a positive impact on the comfort of tenants,

that there is a desire from tenants to be involved in the retrofitting process and they want to know more about it. We see differences in the concerns of different generations and what would put them off the process.

We also discover what's holding the sector back, following a roundtable discussion among private, not-for-profit and charitable housing professionals, as well as architects, academics, and legal and finance experts.



## Problem

The government has committed billions of pounds to pay towards retrofitting and energy improvements via the Social Housing Decarbonisation Fund (SHDF), for which registered providers (RPs) eagerly compete for funds to support the sector's net zero 2050 targets and improve the quality and comfort of their eligible housing stock.

Financing issues and ambitious targets aside, engaging with tenants during the process is critical if RPs are to get the job done – particularly when the [revised directions](#) to

the Regulator of Social Housing (RSH) on tenant involvement and mutual exchange states that the government wants 'to see RPs promote a flexible, varied and accessible approach to resident involvement and empowerment that works for all residents'.

Given the need to physically enter properties and at times cause disruption, it's essential tenants are on board with the proposed energy-saving updates to ensure a smooth process.

## Our hypothesis

Our hypothesis is that tenants want energy-saving updates to their homes, but are unsure about the process and technology, which is causing them to kick back against change. And, depending on age, are likely to want different methods of communication from their landlords.

In order to test this, we surveyed 737 tenants from a variety of registered providers to capture the attitudes and understanding of social housing tenants towards energy-saving technology and retrofitting.

We also split the data by asking respondents their age, social housing provider and whether or not they were aware of any energy-

saving improvements made to their home in the past two years. We provided a full definition and description of what retrofitting was, and this term was used minimally throughout the research survey, in favour of more accessible language such as 'energy efficiency improvements'.

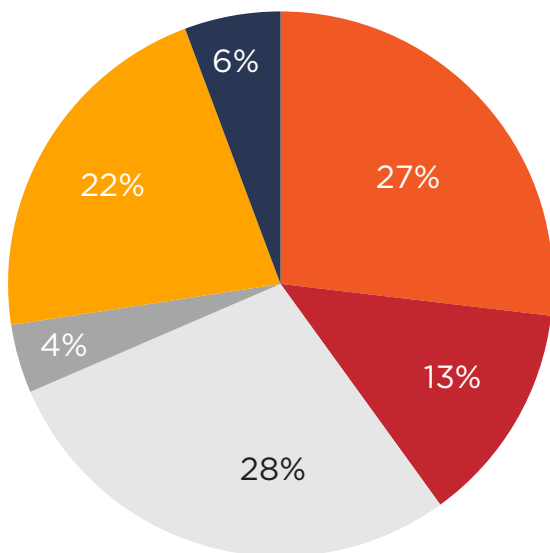
At the time of writing, we believe this is the most comprehensive survey of its kind, to date.

In addition to the data, we also consulted with experts from private, not-for-profit and charitable housing, as well as architects, academics, and legal and finance experts.



## Our findings

Has your home had any energy efficiency improvements in the past 2 years?



- Yes, I was approached by my social housing provider to do this
- Yes, I requested this
- No, but I would be interested in this opportunity
- No, but I have been approached by my social housing provider to have this done in the future
- No and I haven't been approached by my social housing provider to have this yet
- I'm not sure

Our survey showed the majority of people living in social housing (**54%**) have not had any energy efficiency improvements in the past two years. But more than half of those who haven't would be interested in doing so (53% of those who responded 'no'). This is likely down to the fact that 69% of this cohort are confident that retrofitting would reduce their energy use (and therefore bills).

## Retrofitting is having an impact

Of those who have had retrofitting in the past two years – **2 in 3 (67%)** say they have reduced their energy consumption since the energy-efficiency improvements were made.

Residents who haven't had any retrofitting works in the past two years are three times more likely to state that their house is **not** a comfortable temperature all year round (**54% vs 15%**), indicating retrofitting works are having a positive impact on tenants.

My home is **not a comfortable temperature** all-year-round

**54%**

People who have **not** had their homes retrofitted



**15%**

People who have had their homes retrofitted



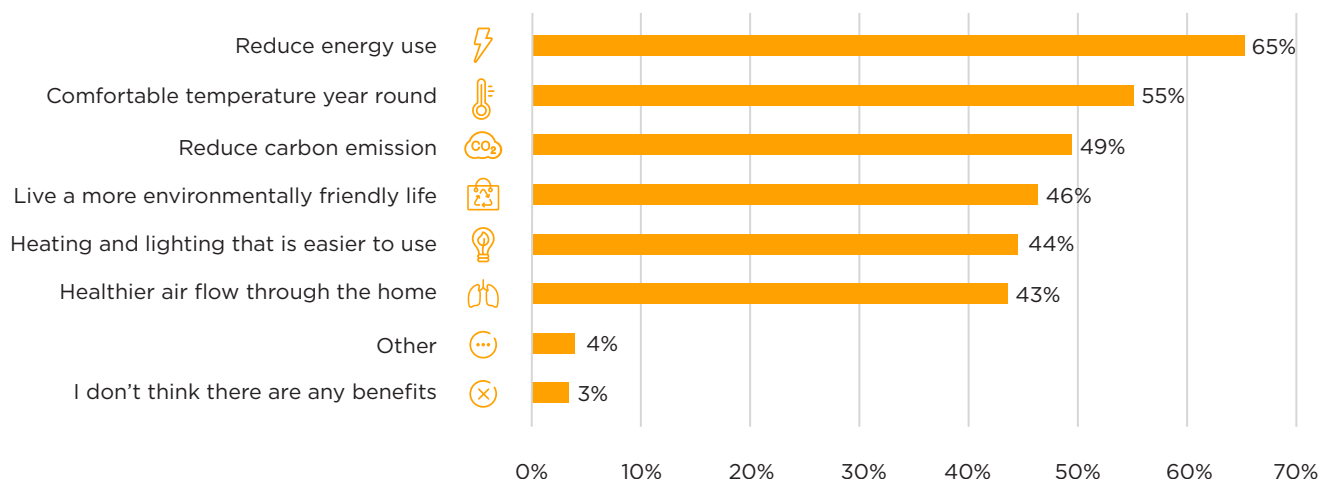


## Perceived benefits

When asked ‘what, if anything, do you think are the benefits of improving the energy efficiency of your home?’, reducing energy use was the top answer. However, the results

show a good understanding of the benefits generally, with only a very small minority (3%) stating that they did not believe there were any benefits to retrofitting.

What, if anything, are the benefits of improving energy efficiency in your home?



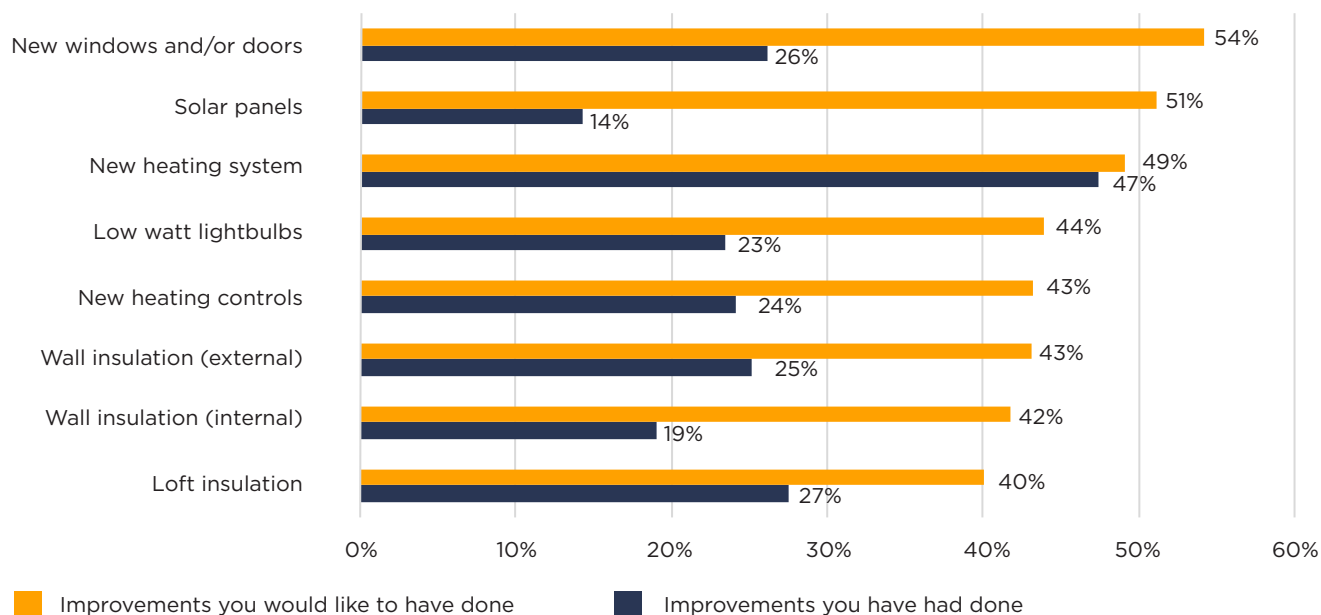
## Priority improvements

When we compare what energy efficiency updates tenants want most against what improvement technology tenants have actually had, we see a mismatch in priorities.

Data shows greatest demand for new doors and windows, solar panels and heating systems. However, the most applied products are heating systems and loft insulation, with solar panels the least likely to have been

installed. This mismatch in what tenants want vs what they receive is likely down to tenants wanting technology and products that are 'visual' over fabric-first that's 'hidden' in lofts and walls - indicating that the sector is still a long way from ensuring the benefits of these 'behind the scenes' improvements are fully understood by tenants.

### Priority improvements

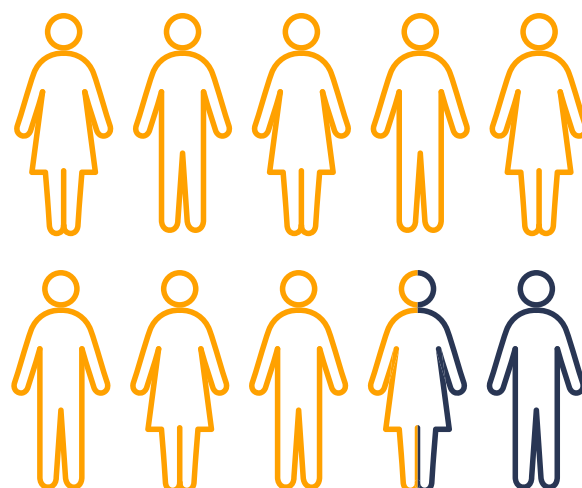


## Tenants want to know more

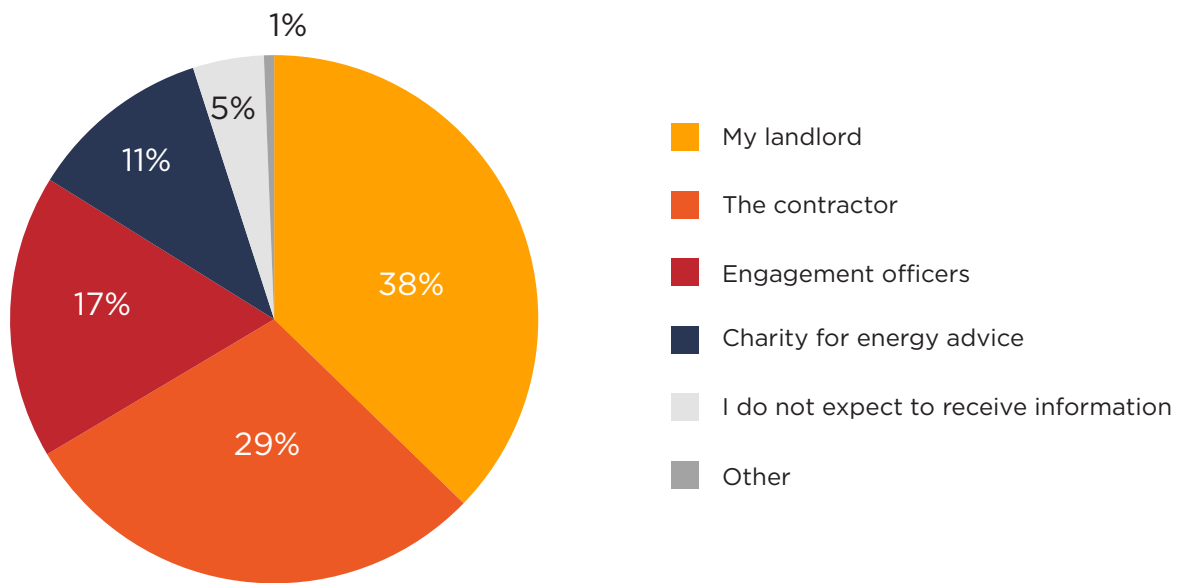
Getting the right balance between educating and involving, but not over complicating, is crucial in gaining the trust and backing from tenants. Our research shows that tenants want to know more, with **7 out of 10 (70%)** interested in receiving more information about how retrofit changes would affect their home and nearly **9 out of 10 (86%)** wanting to be more involved in the process of making their home more energy efficient.

When it comes to receiving information, most tenants would expect to hear directly from their landlords, closely followed by the contractors employed to do the works, and they would like to receive this information predominantly by email and letter. For these two questions, tenants could select multiple options.

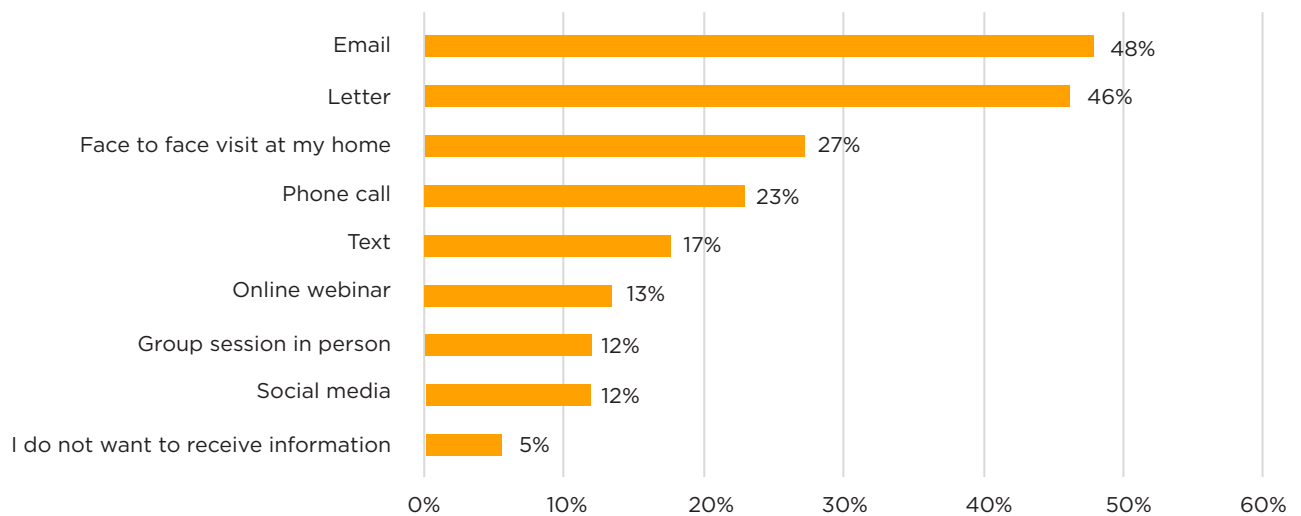
Nearly **9 in 10 people** want to be involved in the process of making their home more energy efficient



Who would you expect to provide you with information about energy saving technology?



How would you like to receive information about retrofitting?





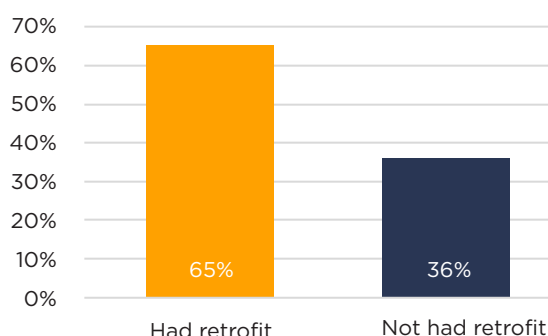
## Sharing positive stories

Our data shows that **3 in 4 (75%)** of those who haven't had any retrofitting in the past two years would be 'excited to experience the benefits' it brings. This is despite the fact that only **36%** of this group have heard of others having a positive experience with the process.

This changes significantly when those who have had retrofitting in the past two years are asked: from this group, **65%** claim to know of others having a positive experience with the process.

Nearly **3 in 4 (72%)** tenants would like to view a home that's been retrofitted, which could help show, rather than tell, a positive story. Incentives for tenants could be offered for being the first in a community to have energy-saving technology and for hosting an 'open house' for their neighbours.

### I have heard of others having a positive experience



This data indicates a need to share success stories to build trust, and there is an opportunity for RPs to utilise positive tenants with a good understanding to help communicate to the wider community.



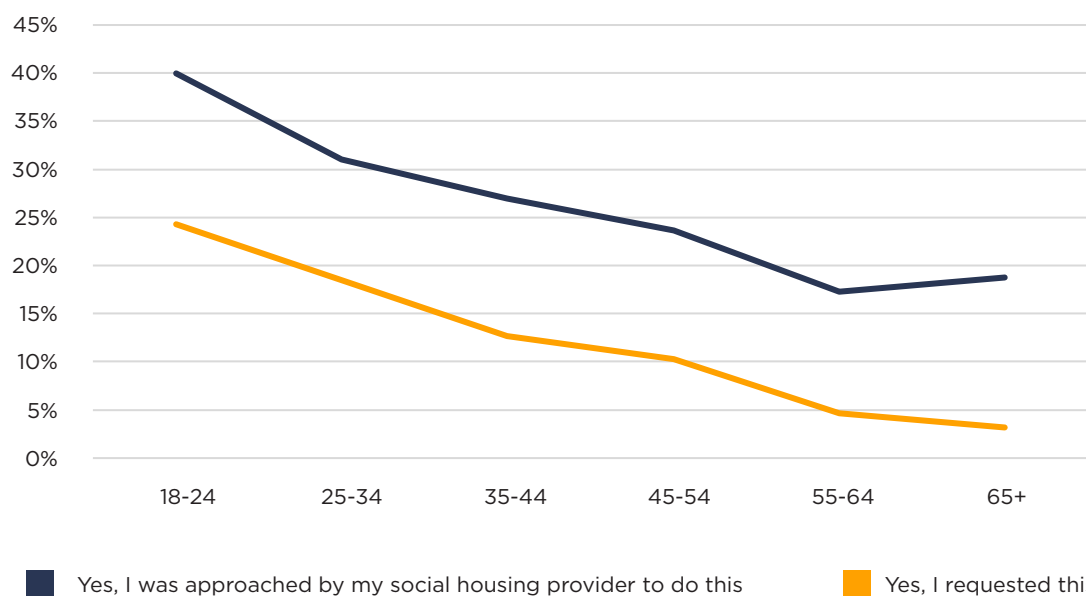


## Influence of age

Our data shows there are key differences in attitudes and experiences of age demographics. Younger people are more likely to have been approached by their social

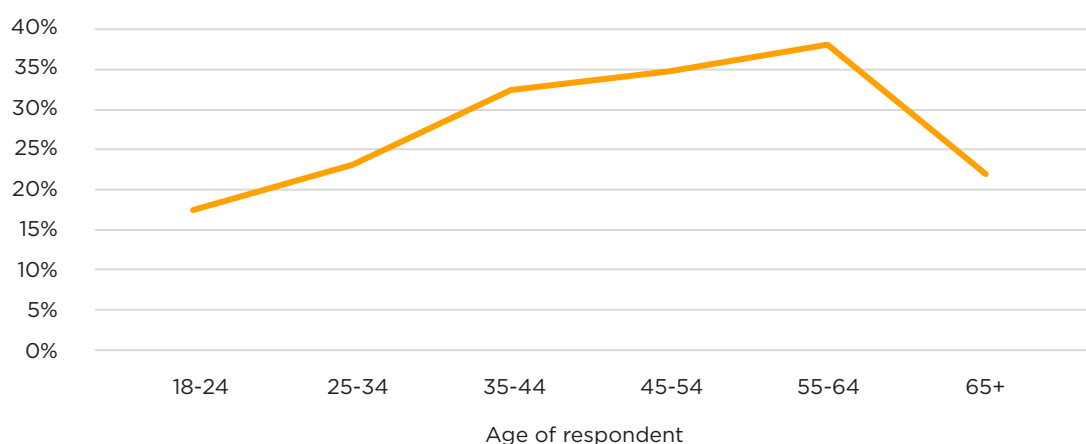
housing provider to have energy efficiency improvements to their homes and are also more likely to have requested this.

Have you had any energy efficiency updates in the past 2 years?



Of those who have not had any retrofitting in the past two years, it's those aged between 55-64 who would be most interested in finding out more.










I have not had any retrofitting in the past 2 years, but I would be interested in this opportunity



We also see a difference in the concerns raised by different generations (see key concerns section).

## Key concerns

Overall, the main concerns of tenants can be split into three themes: timelines, hassle and communication.

	Works not happening quickly enough	28%
	Not understanding the process or timeline	27%
	Not understanding what works will be done	25%
	Having contractors in my home	23%
	Fitting in the retrofit improvements around your professional or personal life	23%
	Existing health issues making large-scale works difficult	20%
	Moving towards electric heating due to gas and oil being phased out	19%
	Not understanding the benefits of the improvements	18%
	Not understanding how to use a new heating system	18%

### Other **concerns** mentioned



Costs being passed onto tenants



Property being damaged



Disruption



Contractors sticking to timeframes



Substandard workmanship



False information



New technology not being accessible





A lack of understanding was also a key concern for tenants; the data shows a significant difference between those aged 54 and under versus those aged 55+,

who were consistently more concerned about understanding the process, works and technology.

Concern	Aged 54 and under	Aged 55+
Not understanding the process or timeline	24%	31%
Not understanding what works will be done	23%	34%
Moving towards electric heating due to gas and oil being phased out	17%	26%

This lack of understanding is consistent with a lack of knowledge or information: **64%** of people either **don't know or aren't sure about the options available** to them for having their home retrofitted. This figure jumps up significantly for people aged **55+ to 84%**.

Understanding is not the only difference between the generations: 'disruption' is the

biggest concern to people under 44, with more than half (**52%**) agreeing 'disruption at my home would put me off having my home retrofitted', compared to just **33%** of people aged 45+.

RPs could explore temporary housing measures to counteract this, particularly if significant retrofit is required.

## What's stopping the sector?

Overwhelmingly, tenants want to be involved in the process (86%) and this is a common theme across all ages – whether they have been approached about retrofit or not.

However, the social housing sector owns [4.4 million](#) properties in the UK, making retrofitting energy-saving fabric improvements and technology a huge undertaking when you take into consideration all the challenges facing providers; from finance and future-proofing properties, to the skills gap and strict targets.

So, while there is significant potential for tenant engagement if approached well and with knowledge and demographic in mind, there are other factors causing bumps in the road to net zero.

In an exclusive panel discussion at Housing 2023, experts discussed some of the key barriers and solutions to the retrofit challenge.



## Not one size fits all

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Experts around the table recognised that what works for one customer or building might not work for another and that, in the future, some of our most energy-efficient homes might become some of our most inefficient homes as our summers get warmer and our reliance on

mechanical cooling increases. As a result, they argued that the sector needs to be dynamic in its approach to decarbonisation, keeping an eye on fuel costs, technology and climate adaptation.

## Connect the dots for funding

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At present, issues are being tackled and experienced by organisations in silos. Given so much of the funding and financing is coming from government, why aren't we (industry and government) connecting the dots? A good home creates savings elsewhere – take the NHS, for example, we know that substandard housing is costing the [NHS £1.4 billion](#) a year, from slips, trips, falls as well as issues from drafts, damp

and poor insulation, just to name a few.

Finance experts suggested government could begin issuing pay-backs for providers who can demonstrate health improvements through housing, including prevention statistics, so there is greater autonomy from providers of where their money is spent and on what technology.

## Measure what matters

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Experts argued that we are not collecting the right data. Instead of the likes of EPC ratings, we should be collating data that demonstrates the benefits high-quality homes have on health and wellbeing, such as consistency in temperature and accessibility, and start having more conversations between institutions – such as planning, and health and social care – to achieve better outcomes for people and

the planet, and get greater bang for our taxpayers' buck.

There is also an opportunity to measure social value, with one panellist sharing their practice of training the local community to install and maintain new technology – offering training and jobs to the unemployed tenants who live locally.

## Story telling

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Language, perception and awareness continue to be sticking points for engaging the hearts and minds of tenants.

Rather than talking about 'retrofit', we need to explain – through stories and humanisation –

the benefits. This needs to be tailored too. While the bigger picture of decarbonisation and climate change will appeal to some, to the masses, we need to help them see how and why it will benefit them as individuals and their family.







## Conclusion

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Social housing providers and their tenants are forever the guinea pigs for the latest initiatives and technology. Funding and unrealistic timescales for delivering schemes through the grants that are provided remain a test, but providers are rising to the challenge.

However, activity remains reactive. And

without a carrot for housing providers, we won't see change towards more proactivity.

What's clear from our research is that the appetite for energy-saving refits is strong among tenants. Now, it is up to us to convert that interest into engagement and that demand into action.

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