D1.1 Scoping Study – Management perspective

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## Introduction

This report is the D1.1 deliverable for the ITaaU network plus funded ‘Communities in the Clouds’ project. The report provides a description of the fieldwork undertaken to develop our understanding of the ways in which technology is used by high rise and high density communities. The report complements the work in D1.2, taking a management, rather than resident-oriented perspective.

## Managing a development

In general the management of a large scale development will be under the responsibility of a formal entity, such as a management company, housing association or council (for the remainder of this document we refer to these as management company). There will typically also be an arrangement with a representative set of residents and owners, to offer a degree of input into bigger decisions (new building works, maintenance) and feedback from the wider residential community. The nature of the relationship between these resident-run associations and the management companies will vary according to the legal structures in place. Figure 1 presents a simplified overview of a typical relationship between stakeholders involved in some aspect of the management of a residential development:

Figure : Typical relationship between stakeholders for residential developments in UK

Freeholders are individuals, consortiums or companies that own the land that a development is built on. Leaseholders are apartment owners (technically they ‘lease’ an apartment for a large duration (typically 99 or 999 years). The freeholder will often employ a management company to run the development (i.e. maintain the physical property / estate) and a leaseholder will pay the management company a monthly charge to cover these costs. Leaseholders are bound by a ‘lease’ which is a legal document that sets out the conditions of owning a property in the development. It will cover details such as permitted fixtures and fittings, use of balconies, rights regarding subletting and so on.

Perhaps the most important point from this is that the roles and responsibilities of the management company lie with property maintenance and management rather than the well-being of the residents. As was put by a member of staff running a residential site in London:

*They’re [management companies] in the business of collecting funds and the people they’re interested in are not the people living there, it’s the owners, the people who are actually paying the service charge* ***[Concierge1].***

## Our approach

We have drawn our information for this report from several sources. We have categorised content from three online forums (the Barbican, The Bow Quarter and Wharf place) and run a quantitative analysis across another 7 forums. We have run a workshop with representatives from four management companies: Crabtree, Galleons Point Management, Pan Peninsula, Capital and Counties; staff: Burrells Wharf concierge and a housing association: Orbit Housing. We have interviewed five Barbican Residents, and have engaged in discussions with residents on Barbican’s website: [www.barbicantalk.com](http://www.barbicantalk.com). We have also spent two days shadowing a concierge in an East London development.

### Management Perspective

This section presents some of the findings from our discussions with management companies and staff. Slides[[1]](#footnote-1) from the workshop and a full transcript can be found online.[[2]](#footnote-2)

#### Communication

At the start of the workshop, we presented a set of results from our forum analyses to assess the overlap with experiences from the point of view of management All management companies, when asked what the most frequent posts would be related to management mentioned communication and service charges.

Figure x shows the results from our forum analysis, where communication is the top subcategory related to management for two developments and number three for the third. One prominent reason that management companies suggested that communication would feature prominently was due to the high, perhaps unrealistic, levels of expectation from residents.

Figure : Top posts related to management

There were several suggestions why this might be: leaseholder and tenant naivety, unrealistic expectations, poor use of information resources and partial information.

1. Leaseholder and tenant naivety

*“I think a lot of leaseholders don’t understand the legislation. They don’t necessarily know what they bought into. We work with some new build developments where the leaseholders don’t even know what a lease is. They don’t know what service charge is.”* ***[ManagingAgent1]***

Apartment living is subject to a substantive and complex set of legislation, often underwritten by arcane UK property law. One crucial area is the payment of service changes. Leaseholders have a contractual obligation to pay a monthly service charge to the management company; the services that this charge covers will vary from development to development. Our forum analysis found service charge to be one of the top issues discussed in relation to management. The leasehold advice service cites service charges as one of the principle areas for dispute between management and leaseholders[[3]](#footnote-3). Yet there are similarly complex rules and legislation that leaseholders may become embroiled in, including: appointing a new management company, extending a lease, collective enfranchisement, right to manage and Section 20 consultation. When any of these get underway, they will eventually cost leaseholders money; yet it is not unusual for leaseholders to become interested only once requests for payment are made, rather than when their involvement can be effective in steering a process.

**Effective and continuous communication of legislation and process to implicated non-experts is a critical challenge faced by management companies.**

1. Unrealistic expectations

*“buildings are not about where we work and live but who we imagine ourselves to be”* Anna Klingman, Brandscapes

Developers, in a drive to sell as many homes at as high a premium as possible will present developments as not just homes, but as lifestyle choices: readymade living experiences. At the higher end this can include resources such as restaurants, gyms and cinemas. Perhaps a direct consequence of stoking expectations of a luxury serviced lifestyle and correspondingly high service charges, residents expectations may rise well beyond what is practically achievable when it comes to the day to day running of a development:

*“Yeah, I think people as well will say communication and what they mean by that is, ‘You should have known I wanted to know that.’ [collective laughter] You know? And you kind of have to anticipate what people will want to know when you’re in a property management role”* ***[Concierge1]***

One way that these high expectations appear to be manifested is with a desire for management companies to respond immediately to requests, often within a much shorter time than is necessarily practically feasible:

*Some people will have massively unreasonable expectations. They'll email you at 9 o'clock in the morning and they'll be phoning you up at 12 o’clock saying, "You haven't responded to me yet."* ***[ManagingAgent1]***

And from the perspective of a leaseholder:

*“As a leaseholder, I get angry when the response from the managing agent is an explanation of why they cannot deal with my issue because they’re on holiday or they’re at a conference or at a site. I don’t want to know that.”* ***[Resident1]***

Ironically, technological advancement, with its potential to improve efficiencies and reduce the burden of communication, is seen to play a part in stoking resident’s expectations:

*“Once you go to the digital, I don’t think lot of people don’t really think and distinguish between a 24 hour call center and someone who spends some of their time in the office and some of their time sitting in meetings and checks it a couple of times a day”* ***[Regeneration Manager]***

*“People...the massive explosion of email because that is so instant and it’s sent straight away they expect the same response. They don’t know that a property manager has 10, 15, 20…”* ***[ManagingAgent1]***

*“People nowadays expect instant answer.”* ***[ManagingAgent4]***

Companies involved in developing systems to support property management recognise this challenge. From the home page of Dwellant[[4]](#footnote-4):

*“Today, residents increasingly play a more active role in directing their buildings and have higher expectations of Managing Agents. This means that Property Managers need to communicate the value they add more clearly, get more done (and do it more quickly), and prove their expertise more effectively”*

**A key part of a management company’s job is to manage how they are perceived by leaseholders, right the way down to the presentation of clear view of how they are involved in the day to day running of a development.**

1. Poor use of information resources. (information seeking)

When residents first move into a development they’ll require information: bin codes, orientation, rules, manuals, how to use particular facilities and resources and so on. Once more established the nature of the information required may change, but will not cease: when the next round of plumbing inspections is needed, changes to a particular rule, requests for consultation, planning, regulations on servicing, whose responsibility it is for x (see figure x). Management companies and staff recognise the inefficiencies of spending time conveying information to individual residents:

*“You end up not being able to answer other people’s queries because you on the phone getting an ear bashing for half an hour.”* ***[Concierge1]***

Yet management companies face a challenge in getting their residents to use their websites as the first point of contact for information:

*“ It’s just letting people know that the information is there and where to go and see it because we want to cut down on the number of phone calls and emails that we get into the office. The information is there. Go and bloody look for it.”* ***[ManagingAgent1]***

In addition, proactively sending out important and new information is a challenge; management companies still post letters, but put little faith in them being read:

*What they do with that, whether they read it… we send out loads of letters. We know a lot of them aren’t read, but all we can do is give the information, providing the best way and easiest way possible. Then it’s down to the leaseholders. They will come back and they’ll have a moan and we’ll say, “Well, we wrote to you about that last week.” “Well, I didn’t get the letter.” “Well, we know you got the letter.” There’s only so much we can do about giving information out. It’s up to the people receiving it to read it and act on it****. [ManagingAgent1]***

Part of the challenge that they face, they believe is down to information overload. Flyers and junk mail which are hard to compete against:

*“when people are bombarded [and you are.] trying to communicate to them as everyone else in the borough is trying to communicate with them, people tend to ignore it.”* ***[ManagingAgent2]***

*“So communication needs to be simple for a person because they’ve got so much junk mail coming through their door”* ***[ManagingAgent2]***

As a consequence, management company staff can still find themselves resorting to phone calls as the only way to collect crucial input from leaseholders:

*“the concierges have the unenviable task of calling up 1500 apartments going, “We need to check your plumbing system. When are we doing it?”* ***[ManagingAgent3]***

**Websites are not adequately reducing the numbers of phone calls and emails from residents seeking information. Management companies still rely on post to distribute important information, but with limited effect. Information overload is believed to play a part in reducing the effectiveness of communication channels. Phone calls to leaseholders remain a last-ditch but essential method of collecting critical information or authorisation from leaseholders.**

1. Partial Information

Management companies are responsible for maintaining detailed records on a property: maintenance records, insurance documents, financial records, staff records and so on. Most of these records will either be quite static (insurance documents), or will be generated and maintained through a well-defined process (financial, maintenance records). However, in the day to day running of a development, there are sets of events that are less easy to record and this can result in partial or inaccurate records.

High density developments will often consist of transient communities, particularly when there is a high tenant to leaseholder ratio. This is typical in higher-end developments with large numbers of investment properties. On average residents might be expected to live in an apartment for 1 to 2 years. There is often no strong obligation for leaseholders to inform management staff of changes to a tenancy:

*“That’s one problem that we don’t necessarily know who’s living in all the blocks. Second problem is that things change. I’ve just changed the rules for the use of the function room, for example, but I’ve also introduced new rules for people who want to have a skip, for example. How do I publish that? How do I get that out to all of my leasees?”* ***[Concierge1]***

*“The difficulty is communication with tenants because you don't necessarily know who they are, you don’t have up-to-date contact information for them. If you have that --- your mobile number, your email, anything --- please god, give me something for the people who actually live in every single flat in my development. And that’s it really****.” [Concierge1]***

Management companies will often be oblivious to informal arrangements made between residents, which can be challenging to unpick and validate:

*[on car parking] “If these arrangements are made then they’re obviously beneficial for the residents, but it's when that doesn't’ then get communicated to the guys on the desk and somebody will turn up and go, ‘This is my car. I’m parking here tonight.’ And you go, ‘Well, no you’re not.’ They go, ‘No, no. I’ve arranged it with so-n-so.’”* ***[ManagingAgent1]***

**Building related data is relatively easy to manage and maintain, and forms a part of a management company’s obligation. Information on residents; occupancy details, issues and arrangements is a harder challenge and is more likely to be incomplete or inaccurate.**

**Summary**

Communication and the particular problems of dealing with it appropriately are crucial to a management company’s business. One management company suggested that poor communication was the primary reason that residents gave for leaving their current management company; a process that is not undertaken lightly:

*“Every time I go out and I see a potential new client his communication is one of the top things as to why they’re looking to change because they’re not being told what’s going on, they’re having to do all the work”* ***[ManagingAgent1]***

#### Tenants vs Owners

*“chalk and cheese living cheek by jowl”* ***[Concierge1]***

One of the principle separations between residents is whether they are owners (leaseholders) or tenants. In private developments this will have impact upon a resident’s concerns, expectations and, by extension, behaviour. In council association or council housing this separation of concerns may be less distinct; longer term ‘assured’ tenancies can mean that tenants will view their residency as permanent.

In many larger scale residential buildings, particularly at the higher end, there are significantly larger proportions of tenants than leaseholders. Management companies were united in the view that properties will deteriorate when they tip towards a higher proportion of tenants:

*“[..] there’s a big change in the mindset of an owner of a property and a tenant who’s renting”* ***[ManagingAgent4]***

*They don’t care about where they live so much so they’ll scuff the walls* ***[ManagingAgent1]***

This is a view that is shared with some residents:

*“I think evidence suggests that when people rent the level of community involvement etc. fall. The reason renters get involved in local issues beyond their own flat is when something is wrong.”* ***[Barbican Resident]***

The narrowness of this view was challenged by the participant from the housing association who referenced a different demographic and corresponding mindset:

*“You’re speaking about high proportion of renters who are probably in London on a contract for a couple of years and don’t maybe see this as their permanent home. Whereas people whose aspirations and interests and personality or background or stage of life are leading them more to the idea of being in a community.”* ***[Regeneration Manager]***

Underlying the differences between leaseholders and tenants is the formal relationship with the management company. In short, the management company’s customers are the leaseholders; they have no obligation to tenants. This distinction is most apparent when it comes to decisions on running, modifying or improving a development. The consultation process is with the lessees; there are typically few if any channels available for tenants to have any input. On this point, management companies were split.

A concierge, actively involved with all residents on a daily basis presented a practical argument for gathering the views of all residents, irrespective of their sway in the formal consultation process:

*“as a lessee you would want the communal areas of your block to be something which is attractive to tenants. So actually, you would still want that data capture as the managing agent or as an estate manager”* ***[Concierge1]***

*“If you’re a leaseholder sitting in Shanghai as well you might not have a great cultural handle on what goes down well with a London audience.”* ***[Concierge1]***

There was further recognition of the importance of wider involvement as a part of community building:

*“if you can find opportunities that go outside the formal section 20 then you have the opportunity to bring together people whatever their tenure to meet each other as equals, as people who share that space.”* ***[Regeneration Manager]***

Yet management companies were more dismissive, citing practical reasons for keeping consultation exclusive to lessees:

*“tenants are transient, so their opinion matters for a short period of time.”* ***[ManagingAgent4]***

*[..] as a managing agent, I would only want the response from the leaseholder. It’s down to them. If they want to get their tenants opinion, for me, that’s for them to do. For me, as a managing agent, we got to look after the leaseholders.* ***[ManagingAgent1]***

The tensions underlying this discussion are interesting. On one hand, management companies are only obliged to act on behalf of leaseholders; tenants do not pay service charges, they may not be staying in a place for long, and arguably any input into consultation will more likely be driven by immediate and selfish needs rather than by a deliberative, longer term view that appropriately accounts for budgets and fellow leaseholders. On the other hand, tenants are important members of a residential community, often in larger numbers than leaseholders. Renting, rather than owning, does not rule out a resident taking an interest in where he or she lives. If tenants are given a voice in decision making processes, it may strengthen the bonds of a community, allow leaseholders and tenants to ‘meet as equals’ and may lead to more enlightened decisions, given input from a wider community of people who actually live in a development.

It is tempting to distinguish these opposing views as practical versus ideological. Management companies already find it hard to communicate and reach consensus (see our discussion in the Barbican); increasing the number of voices may simply add to the noise. Yet staff who deal with tenants and lessees on a daily basis, or stakeholders who are more directly involved in community building and place-making would prioritise fuller community engagement over and above the practicalities of management.

*“So what we need to do is find something positive, something which caters for the high turnover of people, but makes them feel at home for as long as they choose to make it their home.”* ***[Concierge1]***

**A management company’s obligation is to its leaseholders; tenants typically have no voice in any consultation related to their home. Opening up consultation to tenants may strengthen community ties and lead to more enlightened decisions, but can complicate an already complicated process so is typically resisted by management companies.**

#### Common Issues

Large scale developments, by their nature will be vulnerable to a range of predictable problems:

*“ Most developments have exactly the same issues, whether they be parking, dump refuse, service charges too high, people storing items in communal parts, things like that. You know the main areas of the issues that you’re going to get..”* ***[ManagingAgent1]***

Our own analysis of forum data backs up this assertion. Table x shows the most discussed topics from 10 residential developments (aside from the barbican and bow quarter, the other developments have been given pseudonyms). The left hand side column is the topic that had the most unique contributors (i.e. as opposed to the most posts, so as to not to skew the results with topics where only a few contributors posting at high volumes).

Figure Most discussed topics for 10 developments

We consider some of the issues in more detail:

1. Fellow residents

highlights discussions related to fellow residents and antisocial behaviour. It features in the top five most discussed topics in 6 of the ten forums analysed

Figure Fellow residents and antisocial behaviour

Of the forums that we performed a categorisation, ‘fellow residents’ featured most highly in discussions related to antisocial behaviour (see ). The most common complaint attributed to them was noise.

Figure top postings under antisocial behaviour

These results emphasise the fact that interactions with neighbours are an essential and unavoidable part of apartment living. Forums perhaps are more predisposed to capture tensions and flashpoints, but the overwhelming sentiment of discussions related to fellow residents is negative. (see x) This negativity may be a result, to a greater or lesser extent, of:

1. residents being almost entirely divorced from any shared ideology
2. tensions around sharing essential resources (bins, lifts, communal space)
3. the home’s inability to isolate residents from the behaviour of others (amplifying small irritations)
4. essential collaboration in emotionally loaded or financially significant decisions.

Whatever the reasons, the evidence would indicate that some communities, when left to interact freely, can undermine themselves. This is crucial, given the influence that residents have upon the decisions that determine the future of their buildings. Beyond broken windows, leaks and grubby walls, a residential community’s ability to work together will most critically influence the quality of the space that they live in.

What does this mean for management companies? **Should they (or some other entity) be explicitly involved in the management of occupant communities as well as the buildings that they inhabit?** Informally, this already happens; often disputes between residents will bubble up to management as they become framed by the rules and regulations a development is subject to. **A more enlightened process might anticipate and diffuse tensions before they develop;** whatever the outcomes of a dispute, the tensions are likely to remain, and can undermine any future cooperation (even if mutually beneficial).

1. Water damage and leaks

Although not prominent in our forum analysis, water damage from leaks is a feature of high-rises, and was discussed at some length at the workshop:

*“Plumbing! Plumbing checks! You’ve got lots of people above you. The impact of a leak on your insurance premium can be cataclysmic. I mean, you have a big leak on the top floor, the amount of damage that would cause to communal areas and to people’s chesterfields and things on the way down it’s horrendous.”* ***[Concierge1]***

*“We average two leaks a week at the moment****.”*** ***[ManagingAgent3]***

*“We had one the other day, which was on the 33rd floor, that went all the way down to the ground floor and it’s hit about 10 apartments on the way down. [Gasps from the group] That’s quite common unfortunately****.” [ManagingAgent3]***

Perhaps most pertinent to this study, is the way in which established and well understood processes for mitigating and dealing with leaks are complicated by a requirement for cooperation from residents and leaseholders:

*“A number of people who have refused to pay to have their plumbing checks down are living right on the top of the building. I wouldn’t care if they were on the ground floor. It’s going to leak into the underground car park, so what. But these people are refusing to pay it live right at the top. They have no sense of community or responsibility.”* ***[Concierge1]***

*“There’s a classic story, [...] of a guy who’d left his bath running and he was leaving the development and water was already pouring through the ceiling. The then building manager tracked him down at the bus stop and said, “You left your water running and it’s coming through the ceiling to the flat below.” He said, “I haven’t got time for that mate. I’m late for work.”* ***[Resident1]***

**Here, as with many infrastructural issues, residents serve as side effects to be negotiated, rather than as an integral part of a solution.** The quote above is an extreme version of a wider observation: residents are often selfish; **their compliance is proportional to the immediacy and direct impact of a proposal.** Procedures that impact the few, or are proposed to meet a longer term goal, are more likely to meet with inertia or hostility. We consider the implications of this in more detail in the section on governance.

Crucially, although residents are the principal benefactors of a well-run estate, they are also most likely to negatively influence good management. **When the (mutually exclusive) choice is between of a decision in the best interests of a development and one that appeases residents for the short term, the latter can often win.**

*“He just encouraged [concierge] to be concerned with the costs and to decide where the money will be coming from for any alteration to the space. He explained that [concierge] need to do the math, rationalize, and not do anything that’d would be “disproportionate” to the problem.* ***[fieldwork]***

And later:

*[concierge] then pointed to problems with the gutters on the residential building closest to the office. He said that contractors had reportedly fixed with metal paint but it was not sufficient and had already started flaking off. [Management company] emphasized his point about the bManagingAgent4ce between a permanent solution and cost and told him to take that into account when deciding what to do next.* ***[fieldwork]***

1. Service charge

As mentioned in the introduction, service charges are the annual charges paid by leaseholders to management for running the development. At a minimum the charges will cover maintenance and repair costs, staffing, insurance and management fees, but can also include heating, lighting, lifts, and cleaning. Though not technically an ‘issue’, it is discussed regularly (see ); many leaseholders are not aware of the rights and obligations that come with their tenure and so, for many, the complexity and sums involved can come as a shock.

*[..] we’ve got a specific team that works with new build developments and they are forever, you say, educating the leaseholders and it’s the information that we send out to start with to let them know all of this, what to expect, what they’ve actually bought into. “Yes, you are going to have to pay service charge. I’m sorry. That’s what you bought into. If you want to have a moan at me for that, don’t, because it should be your solicitor you should be moaning at.”* ***[ManagingAgent1]***

When requests for service charges are made (often quarterly) it is time at which a management company’s role is most likely to be scrutinised. The onsite concierge was aware of how critical a time this can be:

*What [management company] seem to do is they seem to tend to send out a lot of the sort of updates with the demand for the service charge. See you haven’t got people exactly in the right frame of mind for the update, you know?* ***[Concierge1]***

Management companies can spend a significant amount of time justifying costs to residents who are relatively unclear on what their money is being spent on, or what they can do to bring down their costs.

One possible outcome from the way that service charges are levied and collected is that it creates a perception of a “service-oriented” living, suggesting a neat separation between the concerns of managers and owners. One member of management staff’s immediate response when asked why resident’s expectations can be unreasonably high:

*It’s because, “I paid my service charge!”* ***[Concierge1]***

Yet, as we have already seen, residents are not fully isolated from the responsibilities of managing their developments; to manage effectively, management companies must be able to rely upon a high level of cooperation and interest from their residents. A recent report[[5]](#footnote-5) from the Competition and Markets Authority suggests that when residents invoke a “right to manage” to take on the role of the management of their developments themselves (thus blurring the distinction between owners and management), the ‘satisfaction levels are particularly high’

1. Broadband /Tv

A significant proportion of forum content revolves around advice on television reception and broadband; both in terms of the volume of posts and the length of discussion threads.

Figure : Broadband discussions

Figure Issues reported by residents

Relatively trivial and immediate issues represent a large proportion of communication amongst residents and between residents and management companies.

*We get more calls if the TV reception goes down than if somebody’s been mugged on site or something like that. Everybody will phone up saying my TV’s down.* ***[ManagingAgent1]***

Although these issues may be trivial, they are nevertheless an important part of the relationship between a management company and its residents; **trivial everyday issues are likely to underlie the bulk of interaction between residents and staff; and may go a longer way to affecting perception than the more complex, less visible issues that management companies are responsible for.**

1. Rubbish disposal

Unsurprisingly the management of rubbish features frequently as an issue. Given the size of properties and the amount of rubbish they generate, disposal has to be tightly controlled and managed, and will require all residents to follow fairly rigid procedures to function correctly. It is perhaps the best example of a process where small (wilful or accidental) variations (e.g. bins left in corridors, left outside a bin-store, or deposited on the wrong day) will rapidly create tensions amongst residents and between residents and management.

### The Transparency Problem

It is common, amongst larger developments for residents to use a website (usually a forum) to communicate with each other. Superficially, these sites are an ideal medium, given that they offer an easy way to engage with fellow residents. Our analysis, however, suggests that they are as likely to undermine as empower a community.

From a managing agent’s viewpoint, websites present a difficult challenge. Most have had some experience in engaging with users on a site, but have found themselves spending increasing amounts of times justifying actions, moderating and becoming entangled in arguments that they cannot win:

*“[..] has a policy of not commenting on Facebook Groups as it will become very time consuming and not productive.”* ***[ManagingAgent1]***

*Yeah, I’ve had people openly insult our property manager...pull her apart for making a typo. Every time you make a typo, the errorists win****. [Concierge1]***

*When people decide they’re going to try and use that to have some sort of leverage over us, because it’s public, “I’m going to make you all look like a bunch of useless asses on the forum.” Then, of course, once it’s done, it’s still there in public view. It’s just awful. It doesn’t matter how many times you put, “Okay, this has been dealt with.”* ***[Concierge1]***

*“We had a residents forum that initially started off okay and it just turned into an absolute slaughter toward the management. We went through phases of, at one point, responding on there to people’s complaints and then like you said it just escalated and got worse”* ***[ManagingAgent3]***

*Scared. Scared of saying the wrong thing. Also because of the anonymity, I can understand why they’re scare to an extent because if they put something there people will just go chaa.. [makes clawing hand motion]* ***[Barbican Resident 1]***

*“I outright refuse to even read it because I’ve seen how spiteful and nasty...I don’t think I can...I...on the verge of a nervous breakdown on my last site as a result of how people lose control in how unpleasant they allow themselves to become.” [****Concierge1]***

*We went through a big discussion at the time as to whether we allow a comment box or a forum aspect to it and we decided no because of the issues you face. It does become a vent against the managing agent* ***[ManagingAgent1]***

There is a further issue that quite often emerges once a website has become established, posts may present the development in an unfavourable light:

*“someone googling [..] is going to come across this forum and just read rants, complaints and problems with crime. Its not the full story. For all the shit things people put on here 10 good things go unmentioned”* ***[A resident]***

*“people start taking personal disputes onto a website, into the public domain. Then you need to lay down some rules, don’t you?”* ***[Regeneration Manager]***

*Damage the reputation, the perception, like you say. And obviously from our point of view, that’s critical because people will do research on us, if they want to look into changing managing agents.* ***[ManagingAgent1]***

Although management are unlikely to post on a website, they will often closely scrutinise posts. Residents are often aware that there posts are being read by management:

*[..] the officers of the Barbican Estate don’t post on it [..] even though they all read it. We all know they read it but they never post which is just a shame, I think. I think that’s sad they don’t.*  ***[Barbican Resident 1]***

*If you have a forum, you know what’s going on.* ***[Broadband Supplier]***

*“The comments I’ve read suggest that they do read it, but don’t post anything” [Barbican Resident 2]*

*The real solution is by all means have a forum and use it for intelligence to see what the sentiment is, but never actually weigh in. The alternative is that people will go off to Facebook and Twitter and it will be public anyway* ***[Resident1]***

Yet residents will frequently take the view that management companies should post and respond on a website:

*It would be nice if the Estate office would use it too because there are a number of channels for communication, right?* ***[Barbican Resident 2]***

Forums become self-selecting; it in not unusual for residents to cease using a forums because they are unhappy with its overall character; which can be strongly influenced by one or just a few key users :

*One person can vent because they’ve got a particular issue or they’re just that type of person. Most developments have them. And that can then create a bad impression of the development. It can create a bad sense across everybody because people sit there reading that or the people that are looking to move in see that and think, “My god, I don’t want to buy a flat there. Why would I?”* ***[ManagingAgent1]***

*There’s always three people...always those three people on that website and other people are discouraged.* ***[ManagingAgent2]***

*“I cannot stand, I’m completely open about this, whenever I see posts by [x], I just..I just despair because actually it’s all shit.... I wish he’d go away”* ***[Barbican Resident 1]***

Anecdotally**, management participation can skew the overall content of a site to be predominantly negative.** In the one development that we analysed online data, management use the forum to respond to issues, but the forum is open to be used for any other purpose. When we took the most commonly posted subcategories, many were related to building issues and all had overwhelmingly negative sentiment. The first ‘social’ subcategory is at position 22 (rather than at 1 and 2 respectively in the other two developments).

This is in stark contrast to the data from the other two developments which a more bManagingAgent4ced proportion of positive and negative comments:

Looking at the overall volume of posting for the top ten categories of content, we also see that the two forums that have no explicit management participation share similarities with each other and ‘social’ postings (which have predominantly positive sentiment) form a significant part of the overall content. Conversely, social postings do not even come into the top ten in the development where management take a more active role.

These results point to a broader observation that the responsibility for owning and moderating a residents website must fall to residents. Our interview highlighted **a tendency for residents to source their information from fellow residents, rather than from official sources.**

1. <http://upintheclouds.org/assets/doc/workshop_one.pptx> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. <https://communitiesintheclouds.files.wordpress.com/2014/08/17jul-workshop-transcript.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. http://www.lease-advice.org/publications/documents/document.asp?item=14 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. https://www.dwellant.com [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. https://www.gov.uk/government/news/cma-pushes-for-improvements-to-residential-property-management [↑](#footnote-ref-5)