Resident consultation is vital when it comes to running a development programme smoothly. **David Singleton** looks at how resident liaison officers, fun days and focus groups can all be part of the mix.

It can be tough living on an estate undergoing a major development programme. Amid demolished buildings, heavy vehicles and loud noise, residents can quickly come to feel they are stranded on a building site. Then there’s the widespread uncertainty about what’s happening as work progresses.

But now, four years after the Egan report highlighted the need to empower residents and to improve communication with service providers, both housing associations and contractors are making ever more visible efforts to manage the disruption caused to residents – both in the short and long term. Resident consultation is the name of the game and one of the most prominent examples of this approach are resident liaison officers, introduced by a number of social housing contractors to communicate with residents while a development is taking place.

Michael Jordan-Frere is one of 15 resident liaison officers currently employed across London and the south east by social housing contractor United House. He describes RLOs as ‘the buffer that people turn to’. ‘We are somebody they can talk to and address the challenges on a day-to-day basis. It means there is a face for the residents, there is someone to blame, there is someone at the end of a line who will speak to them,’ he says.

United House began employing RLOs in the early 1990s. Managing director Jeff Adams says: ‘It had become clear that ensuring residents’ co-operation ahead of works starting was a major factor in keeping to programme and that the benefits of so doing justified employing specialist professionals to undertake the task.’

He adds: ‘Projects were becoming larger and longer term and clients were becoming more demanding in terms of resident involvement and satisfaction. At the same time, the whole industry was becoming more sensitive to the special needs of residents who may be elderly, single parents or from a different cultural or ethnic background.’

Now, both contractors and social landlords view RLOs as a vital cog in the development process. At the Grahame Park Estate Project...
Barne, the ‘Choices for Grahame Park’ consortium involving Genesis Housing Group and Notting Hill Housing Group was offered RLOs by numerous developers. Genesis Housing Group director of regeneration Tom McGregor says ‘As part of a resident-centred approach, they can reduce the level of disturbance, negotiating hours of work and responding to concerns such as those of elderly tenants and parents taking their children to school.’

But RLOs are only a number of innovations used by housing associations to secure residents’ input and the Grahame Park consortium has devised various means of communicating with residents; housing exhibitions, fun day events, newsletters, public meetings, trips to visit other regeneration projects, a housing needs survey, an independent resident adviser, a neighbourhood panel and a vote on final options are all part of the plan drawn up by the two housing association groups.

Mr McGregor says: ‘A great deal of time was spent working with residents so that what they liked and disliked about Grahame Park could be built into our proposals. There was much they liked including space standards in their homes and local transport links but they wanted proper street layouts and they were concerned about crime and graffiti.’

He believes that many past projects have paid a long-term price for neglecting the concerns of residents. He says: ‘Too often in the past well intentioned projects have failed because they have been delivered from “above” and focused only on the buildings. Basic elements were not addressed. Residents didn’t feel safe. Lighting was poor and pathways that looked good on the drawing board could be frightening to walk down on a dark night. No one was responsible for the open spaces and on the worst estates the open spaces became unsafe areas.’

Now, he says, the lessons of the past have been learnt and resident input is a prerequisite for any large-scale project. He warns that ‘unless a regeneration scheme has residents needs and aspirations at its heart and they are fully engaged in the delivery process, the scheme will fail or be rejected by residents.’

In Newcastle, the Places for People Group is managing the refurbishment of Bewick Court, a 19-storey tower block which is home to 200 residents. One of the most visible buildings in the city centre, its transformation will involve new windows, improved security and an eye-catching aluminium rainscreen that will cover the building’s external concrete panels. Scheduled to take 18 months to complete, work is being carried out while residents remain in their homes.

‘It’s involved road closures and drilling into external concrete. There have been times when it’s been quite horrific for the residents,’ says Susan Meredith, senior housing officer at North British Housing, part of Places for People. But she insists that residents have been consulted and that they are happy to stay in their homes throughout the project. Places for People Newcastle area manager Steve Kay adds: ‘They are very much a part of the transformation process and we have helped them to set up their own focus group to feed back comments and suggestions whilst work is underway.’

Family Housing Association has implemented a full consultation programme to help residents find out more and contribute to the redevelopment of the Stonegrove and Spur Road Estates, in north London, a large-scale project which will provide around 1,000 homes. It involves careful planning and a partnership approach from the main organisations involved.

Family staff are responsible for consulting over future housing services and are working with local people to draw up a residents’ charter. Meanwhile architects HTA are carrying out a series of open workshops to feed ideas into the design. Leaseholders too have their opportunity to discuss issues with the developers. There are regular drop-in surgeries and two planning days at which the outline planning application will be discussed. Bus trips have been organised to take tenants to view similar schemes and there is even a Christmas party planned.

‘The whole objective is to build a partnership with local people to discuss how any disruption during the redevelopment will be managed and to give them input into the design of their future homes and services,’ says Family group marketing, research and information manager Michael Cleaver. Family group north and east London director Paul Durkin says: ‘Residents need to be – and feel – part of the decision making process. If you fail to engage with residents and don’t take them with you, then problems are bound to arise.’