Worked Case: A Tenants' Survey From Question to Brief

Eight decisions to practice before you make them for real

FOR:
the people who will lead a community inquiry, working through it together before gathering any real answers

INCLUDES:
one case in eight stages, a decision to make at each stage, a worked answer to compare against, and questions for your group to discuss

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01 How to use this case

Work through one stage at a time. Read the situation, cover the worked answer, and decide together what you would do and why. Then compare. The worked answers are not the only reasonable choices. Where your group would decide differently, say why. That discussion is the practice.

Allow about two hours for the whole case, or take one stage per meeting.

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02 The case

The people, places, organizations and figures in this document's examples are fictional.

Alder Court is a three-building rental complex with 96 apartments. The Alder Court Tenants' Association has a volunteer committee of seven, no paid staff and a small budget from member dues. For two years, members have complained at meetings about repairs: leaks, broken heating, pests, doors that do not lock. The landlord's office says repairs are handled promptly.

The city housing department is reviewing its inspection schedule. It will decide at a public meeting in four months which complexes get more frequent inspections. The committee wants that decision to take account of what tenants live with.

03 Stage 1. Sharpen the question

Committee members propose the question: "Is our landlord neglecting this building?"

Your call: Is this a good question for the inquiry? If not, what would you ask instead?

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Worked answer: Not as written. "Neglecting" is a judgment about the landlord's intentions and responsibilities. A tenant survey cannot establish intent, and the landlord can dismiss the finding by disputing the word. The housing department is deciding inspection frequency, so it needs to know what tenants are experiencing with repairs, how long they wait and how serious the problems are.

Discuss:
What does the committee lose by giving up "neglect"? What does it gain?

A better question: **"Over the past 12 months, what repair problems have Alder Court households reported, how long did they wait, and which problems are still unresolved?"**

This question has a decision-holder (the housing department), a date (the public meeting), a defined group (households at Alder Court), a defined period (12 months) and a kind of question the association can answer (how many, how long, what is it like). Members can still describe the problem in their own words in the answers, and the brief can report how they describe it.

04 Stage 2. Decide who to ask

There are 96 apartments. The committee knows of 4 that are empty. Several committee members suggest surveying only association members, because they are easier to reach and already trust the committee.

Your call: Who should the survey try to reach?

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Worked answer: Every occupied apartment: 92 households. The question is about Alder Court, and the housing department will ask whether the answers represent the complex or just the association's most active members. Members may differ from non-members in ways that matter. For example, tenants who have had the worst experiences may be more likely to join, or tenants who fear the landlord may be less likely to.

The committee decides to ask one adult in each household, to knock at each door at least three times at different times of day, to offer the survey in the three languages most spoken in the complex, and to record every attempt in the log.

Discuss:
Which households are likely to be hardest to reach at Alder Court? What could the committee do about each? (The companion guide *The Missing People Problem* goes further into this.)

05 Stage 3. An offer of help with consent

The landlord's building manager hears about the survey and offers to help: staff could hand out the forms with rent receipts, and tenants could return them to the management office. This would save the committee weeks.

Your call: Accept, decline or accept in part?

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Worked answer: Decline the offer to distribute and collect forms, and thank the manager for it. Tenants who know their answers pass through the management office may not feel free to describe problems, or to say no. Some may feel they have to take part to stay on good terms. Either way, the answers would be weaker and the consent would not be freely given.

Discuss:
Is there any help from the landlord the committee could accept without affecting consent? (For example, permission to post notices in the lobby.)

The committee writes to the manager to say the survey is independent, that answers go only to the association, and that tenants are free to take part or not. It adds a line to its consent terms: "Your landlord will not see your individual answers. Taking part or not will not be reported to anyone."

06 Stage 4. Two requests for the data

Before collection starts, two requests arrive.

- A city council member's office asks for a copy of "the full survey results" to use in a housing campaign.
- A graduate student at a local university offers to analyze the data for free, if she can also use it in her thesis.

Your call: How should the committee respond to each, and when?

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Worked answer: Both requests should be settled now, before anyone answers, because what tenants are told must match what will happen.

Council member's office: Offer the published brief when it is released, and a meeting with the committee. Do not offer individual answers or a list of who took part. The committee does not know how the results will be used in a campaign, and tenants have not agreed to that.

Discuss:
What should the committee do if the council member's office objects publicly to being refused?

Graduate student: This could be valuable, but only on written terms agreed first. The committee completes the partner agreement in its study plan: she receives answers with names, apartment numbers and any identifying details removed; she may use them only for this analysis and her thesis; the committee reviews any draft that quotes tenants; her university's ethics review must approve her use before she receives anything; she destroys her copy by an agreed date. The consent terms then tell tenants this: "A student from [university] will help count the answers. She will not see your name or apartment number."

If the student or her university cannot accept these terms, the committee does its own counting.

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07 Stage 5. Something goes wrong during collection

Halfway through, a volunteer leaves a folder of completed forms on a laundry room bench for about an hour. Another tenant finds it and returns it to the committee.

Your call: What should the committee do?

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Worked answer: Treat it as a breach, even though the folder came back. Following its data-ownership terms, the lead person tells the committee the same day and records what happened in the log. The committee works out which forms were in the folder. Because names were kept on a separate sheet, the forms show answers but not names; however, some answers mention apartment numbers or details that could identify someone. The committee contacts those tenants, explains what happened and offers to remove their answers. It changes the procedure so that completed forms go straight into a sealed envelope, and retrains volunteers.

Discuss:
Would your organization's current practices have prevented this? What would you change?

The committee mentions the incident and the change in the method notes of its brief. Being open about a mistake handled well does more for the inquiry's credibility than silence would.

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08 Stage 6. Reading the results

After six weeks, the log shows:

Households	Count
Occupied apartments	92
Took part	61
Declined	13
Not reached after three attempts	18

Your call:
Which of these statements can the committee make in its brief?

Of the 61 households that took part, 44 said they had reported at least one repair problem to the landlord in the past 12 months. Of those 44, 27 said at least one reported problem had taken more than 30 days to fix or was still not fixed. Heating and leaks were the problems most often described as unresolved.

At the sharing meeting, tenants who took part say the results match their experience. Two tenants say the survey missed something: several households fixed problems themselves rather than reporting them, because they did not expect a response.

- a) "Most Alder Court tenants have waited more than a month for repairs."
- b) "27 of the 61 households that took part reported a repair problem that took more than 30 days to fix or was still unresolved."
- c) "The landlord is failing to make repairs."

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- d) “Tenants at the sharing meeting said some households repair problems themselves instead of reporting them. The survey did not ask about this, so we cannot say how common it is.”

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Worked answer: b) and d).

- a) is not supported. 27 of 61 is less than half of those who took part, and the 31 households who did not take part are not known. The statement also drops the 30-day definition.
- b) states the finding with its count, its base, its definition and its period. A reader can check it.
- c) goes beyond the evidence. The survey describes tenants' reports; it does not show why repairs were slow or whose responsibility each delay was.
- d) records something important that came from making sense of the results together, and is honest about its limits. It also points to a question for next time.

Discuss:
The two tenants' point suggests the survey may undercount problems. Should the brief say that? How, without claiming more than the committee knows?

The committee also writes down, before deciding what the numbers mean, that it does not know whether households that were not reached had more repair problems or fewer. The brief will say so.

09 Stage 7. What to ask for

The committee drafts its request to the housing department: "Shut down the landlord's operation until all repairs are done."

Your call: Is this the right request for this brief?

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Worked answer: No. The housing department is deciding inspection frequency, not enforcement against one landlord, and the evidence describes tenant reports rather than code violations. A request outside the decision is easy to set aside, and it takes the reader's attention away from the findings.

A request that fits the decision and the evidence:

1. Include Alder Court in the more frequent inspection schedule for the coming year.
2. Inspect the heating systems and the apartments where tenants reported leaks, with tenants' agreement.
3. Reply in writing to the association within 30 days of the public meeting, saying what was decided and why.

The committee can still raise enforcement elsewhere, with evidence suited to that question.

Discuss:
What would a request look like if the department were deciding something else, such as a new repair complaints process?

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10 Stage 8. The reply

Five weeks after the public meeting, the housing department replies. Alder Court will not move to the more frequent schedule, because its inspection record shows few violations. The department will carry out a one-time inspection of heating systems. It does not mention leaks or the request for a written reason.

Your call: What should the committee do with this reply?

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Worked answer: Record it, share it and follow up on what was not answered.

- **Record:** In the inquiry log, note the date, the decision, the reason given and the parts of the request that were not addressed.
- **Share:** Tell tenants what the department said, in the same languages and places the results were shared.
- **Follow up in writing:** Thank the department for the heating inspection and ask for a date. Ask two questions: what its inspection record counts (for example, only violations found on scheduled visits, or tenant complaints as well), and why the leak reports were not addressed. The gap between "few violations" and "many slow repairs" may itself be a finding. The two sources may be counting different things.
- **Decide what next:** The committee might ask for the department's inspection records through an evidence request, or plan a follow-up survey that asks about problems tenants did not report.

Discuss:
At what point should the committee stop following up and decide the inquiry is complete?

A partial answer is still an answer. The inquiry has put tenants' experience on the record, and the department has had to respond to it.

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11 What this case practiced

Stage	The decision	The principle
1	Replace a judgment with a question you can answer	Ask what the evidence can show, for the decision at hand
2	Ask every household, not just members	The question defines who must be asked
3	Decline the landlord's help with forms	Consent is only free when people can say no safely
4	Settle data requests before collection	What people are told must match what will happen
5	Treat the misplaced folder as a breach, even though it came back	Keeping promises includes admitting when one was broken
6	Report counts, bases and limits	Claims no bigger than the evidence
7	Ask for what the decision-holder can decide	A request that fits the decision is harder to set aside
8	Record and follow up on a partial reply	The inquiry ends with a record, not just a report

RELATED: *Running a Community Inquiry That Institutions Can Act On*; *Community Study Plan*; *Two-Page Findings Brief*; *The Missing People Problem*.

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12 Further reading

1 **Pew Research Center, Writing Survey Questions**. Plain guidance on question wording, order and testing, from a large survey organization.

2 **AAPOR, Standard Definitions**. How survey researchers count people who were asked, answered, declined or could not be reached.

3 **University of Kansas Center for Community Health and Development, Community Tool Box, Chapter 3: Assessing Community Needs and Resources**. Practical sections on running surveys and listening sessions in a community.

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