

Embedding a Culture of Tenant Engagement

Recommendations
for Social Housing
in the Irish Context



A Report produced for Tuath Housing Association by:

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Foreword

The Board of Tuath Housing are very pleased to commission this research report on Tenant Engagement. This research is timely as the new Approved Housing Bodies Regulatory Authority (AHBRA) published new standards for Approved Housing Bodies (AHBs) which will look to ensure tenants and tenant views are central to the work of AHBs.

This tenant-centred approach will include developing effective relationships with tenants, making sure services meet the needs of tenants by providing them with opportunities to have their voice heard on a range of issues relating to their tenancy, and consulting with tenants on approaches for improving the communities they live in. This approach will require a culture of tenant engagement within AHBs where tenants are the lens through which our services are developed.

Tuath Housing is very proud to be at the forefront of implementing tenant engagement in social housing in Ireland. We aim to provide homes to our tenants, not just ‘bricks and mortar’. We want to help create vibrant and welcoming communities that will increase the wellbeing of those living in them. We want to provide a first-class service to our tenants and to do that we need to look for, listen and respond to their views and feedback. With this aim we put our first dedicated Tenant Engagement staff member in place in 2018.

Since then, we have made great progress in developing our services so that we now provide a range of mechanisms for our tenants to give feedback in ways that suit them, including through our tenant forums and working groups. Through our support of residents’ groups and community events our Tenant Engagement staff and Housing Officers are helping to develop strong, vibrant communities where our tenants live. Tenant Engagement helps us to build and strengthen our relationship with our tenants, increasing tenant satisfaction but also allowing us to provide a more tenant focused service.

Tenant Engagement is a relatively new area to the social housing sector in Ireland and, in line with the new regulatory standards, AHBs are beginning to form and implement their tenant engagement strategies. As noted in the introduction to this research, there is very little information available particularly in an Irish context about what works to ensure that tenant engagement activities achieve the participation and involvement we seek from our tenants and their communities.



We aim to provide homes to our tenants, not just ‘bricks and mortar’. We want to help create vibrant and welcoming communities that will increase the wellbeing of those living in them.



Therefore, the motivation for commissioning this research was a desire to be better informed about the best ways we can implement tenant engagement to get wider interest, involvement, and commitment from our tenants.

As this report demonstrates there is much that can be learned from the experience of AHBs in other countries who have been implementing tenant engagement for several years. There is also learning from the work that AHBs in Ireland have done so far around tenant engagement that can be of benefit to us and other AHBs and our wider stakeholders.

This research adds to the knowledge of what works in tenant engagement, gives insights into best practice, and provides recommendations that we hope will help AHBs to implement a tenant-centred approach and embed tenant engagement in the culture of their organisation.



Daragh O'Sullivan
CHAIR
Tuath Housing

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Executive Summary

Introduction

This study was commissioned by Tuath Housing with the objective of helping to ensure that tenants and their views are central to the work of AHBs. The overarching aim of the study was to provide an evidence base for recommendations that could help AHBs in Ireland embed a culture of tenant engagement.

Specific objectives included: undertaking a review of international academic and grey literature on tenant engagement; examining current policy and practice in Tier 3 AHBs in Ireland; and, making realistic recommendations that could help AHBs firmly embed tenant engagement.

The basis for the conclusions and recommendations set out in the final chapter of the report emerges from a synthesis of the evidence from three key sources: firstly, research on policy and practice in the UK; secondly, an overview of approaches to tenant engagement in the significantly different historical and socio-political context of continental Europe; and, thirdly, the semi-structured interviews with Tier 3 AHBs who form the Housing Alliance.

Key conclusions

AHB representatives who took part in the study all demonstrated a good understanding of the concepts of ‘tenant participation’, ‘tenant engagement’ and ‘tenant empowerment’ and the associated nuances. Overall, ‘tenant engagement’ was the preferred term as it suggested a more enduring two-way process, but it was generally agreed that terminology was significantly less important than what actually happens in practice.

Top-down leadership was generally more important than bottom-up activism in accelerating the journey towards more effective tenant/resident engagement in Ireland’s AHBs, whereas the current regulatory framework has played only a minor role.

AHBs are well aware of the benefits of meaningful tenant participation, including: the commercial benefits (direct financial savings and services that provide better value for money); benefits for tenants (higher levels of service and satisfaction, as well as potentially greater confidence and employability); and, wider societal benefits (promoting social cohesion, the inclusion of diverse communities and generally better mutual support networks).

There is also a general acknowledgement of the challenges faced by social landlords in their journey to embed a culture of tenant engagement in their organisation, including: improving the representativeness of tenant bodies and in particular involving hard to reach groups, such as older people, younger people, geographically isolated groups and ethnic minorities.

In contrast, there appeared to be differing views on the significance of tenant representation on AHB boards. The potential conflict of interest between a tenant’s fiduciary duty to the organisation and their role as a tenant was acknowledged. Some AHBs had found ways to minimise this issue, while for others board membership was not necessarily the most effective means of ensuring tenant empowerment.

Finally, it was clear that all Tier 3 AHBs are making concerted efforts to embed tenant engagement more thoroughly in their organisation. This is reflected in recent recruitment measures and in the examples given of where tenant engagement has had a direct impact on organisational policy and practice. However, there were also clearly differences in attitudes to the appropriate level of tenant empowerment and an acknowledgement that many tenants/residents do not wish to participate in more formal methods of engagement and are generally satisfied as long as they receive a decent service.

Recommendations

Based on these general conclusions and on the comments emerging from stakeholder interviews and subsequent discussions the study makes a series of recommendations that could help to embed the culture of tenant engagement more firmly in Ireland's AHBs. These are separated into key principles that should underpin an organisation's Tenant Engagement Strategy along with a series of more practical recommendations.

KEY PRINCIPLES

- 1 There is no right or wrong in relation to the optimal balance between the 'consumerist' (service-orientated and individualistic) and 'citizenship' (empowerment and responsabilisation) models of tenant engagement. The combination of policy and practice chosen by the organisation must in the last analysis be a decision taken by the board, bearing in mind its organisational history, culture, resources and of course the views of tenants/residents.
- 2 All key stakeholders, and in particular the tenants/residents, are consulted in a meaningful way prior to the development of a Tenant Engagement Strategy.
- 3 Adequate resources (finances and staff time), including additional support from central government, are vital for effective capacity building, especially for tenants' representatives to provide them with the knowledge and skills to engage effectively – ensuring at the same time that it does not become a disempowering experience and that tenants do not lose their independent perspective.
- 4 A 'One Team' culture should permeate the organisation in which senior management demonstrate a clear commitment to embedding tenant engagement and staff, and board members and residents undertake the same training and work towards a clear set of organisational goals.
- 5 There are significant advantages to adopting an incremental approach to embedding engagement. This also facilitates the indispensably necessary level of trust to be built up between residents' representatives and their landlord over a period of time.
- 6 More emphasis is needed on the evaluation of tenant engagement in order to justify the associated expenditure and help convince tenants/residents of the value to them.
- 7 Any regulatory framework for tenant participation should be 'light-touch' and adopt the principle of 'comply or explain', thereby giving AHBs the possibility of adopting a modified approach to tenant engagement that is in harmony with their organisation's culture and vision.

PRACTICAL RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1 Giving a greater priority to building *collective* engagement mechanisms such as a National Tenants' Forum that brings together tenant/resident representatives of all Tier 3 AHBs. This forum could act as a sounding board for policy and practice initiatives as well as being a representative body campaigning for better housing services.
- 2 Increasing emphasis on ensuring greater representativeness of engagement bodies at regional and local level, including a focus on 'hard-to-reach' groups.
- 3 Tier 3 AHBs could organise joint training programmes that cover key common engagement-related themes – thereby achieving economies of scale – while at the same time providing additional separate organisationally specific courses.
- 4 Tenants/residents should be involved in determining the specific approach to engagement, including the optimum combination of methods. This could be formalised in the form of a 'Tenant Engagement Compact' that sets out its scope, remit and form.
- 5 Face to face meetings are still seen as one of the most effective ways of engaging tenants, but there should also be a growing emphasis on alternative methods, specifically, digital ones that will provide the flexibility for tenants to engagement in a manner compatible with their circumstances.
- 6 Ensuring that relevant information is easily accessible and transparent for tenants/residents, enabling them to make more informed contributions to the engagement process.
- 7 Perhaps most importantly, for tenants/residents who choose to engage, it is vital that they are really in a position to influence the decision-making process in a meaningful way. This should include providing them with the opportunity to help shape the agenda rather than just responding to it. Tenants/residents must be able to see the impact of their involvement because, if they can, they and others will be more likely to engage in the future, thus helping to ensure that the process of engagement becomes an enduring one.



01

Introduction

This report represents the outcome of a study commissioned by Tuath Housing in early 2021. Recent academic contributions to the policy debates around tenant participation and engagement in the context of the UK have noted a lack of information about the current approaches of social landlords, how tenants experience their involvement in the governance of social housing, and, more generally, perceptions of the effectiveness of participation and engagement (Hickman and Preece, 2019; Preece, 2019; Serin *et al.*, 2018).

This evidence gap appears to be apparent in the Irish context too, and with the increased emphasis on tenant engagement emanating from the Housing Agency Regulation Office¹, and more recently from the newly-established Approved Housing Bodies Regulatory Authority², there is a need for evidence of what works in tenant engagement, what the benefits are for both AHBs and tenants and recommendations on how to successfully embed a culture of tenant engagement within AHBs in Ireland.

The overarching aim of this study is therefore to provide an evidence base for a series of recommendations that could help AHBs in Ireland embed a culture of tenant engagement in their approach to housing management in terms of policy and practice.

¹ <https://www.housingagency.ie/sites/default/files/18-11-26-AHB-Voluntary-Regulation-Framework-FINAL.pdf>

² <https://www.ahbregulator.ie/app/uploads/2021/10/AHBRA-Draft-Standards-for-AHBs.pdf>

In meeting this overall aim the study addressed a number of agreed objectives:

- 1** Undertake an international literature review that will provide insights into good/best practice in tenant engagement in the planning, delivery, decision-making and review process of Housing Services in the social housing sector.
- 2** Examine current policy and practice in relation to tenant engagement in Tier 3 AHBs.
- 3** Explore the potential for a number of good practice initiatives in the context of Ireland's social housing framework.
- 4** Make realistic recommendations that could help AHBs firmly embed active tenant engagement in the management of social housing.
- 5** Identify the resources and governance structures and processes that would be needed to implement these recommendations.

Following the publication of 'The Performance Standard and Assessment Framework' by the Regulation Office in 2018, AHBs are expected to deliver excellent tenant services and to manage their stock efficiently and effectively. Section 3.2.3 of the Performance Standard sets out the regulatory requirements expected of AHBs in respect of tenant communication and engagement. Amongst other things, AHBs should have a clear policy, setting out how they will engage and communicate with their tenants. Different engagement methods must be available so that tenants can easily communicate with their AHB, including in emergency situations and out of normal business hours. Furthermore, the Regulation Office expects AHBs to provide opportunities for tenants to shape and influence the services they receive, for AHBs to consult tenants on all relevant matters and for services and information to be provided in an accessible format.

As the AHB sector is diverse, assessment against the Performance Standard is both proportionate and risk based. Therefore, the Regulation Office takes account of size, scale, and the development ambitions of AHBs when conducting its assessments.

This report focuses on Tier 3 AHBs (>300 units) but it is also relevant to Tier 1 and Tier 2 AHBs, and is particularly timely as 2021 saw the final implementation of the Performance Standard. A key question for the research team, therefore, was to

assess the role that the Performance Standard has played in encouraging AHBs to intensify their efforts to embed tenant engagement in their policy and practice.

Methodological approach

The methodological approach to the study comprises two key complementary components:

(1) Literature Review

An examination of a number of key contributions to both the academic and 'grey' literature on tenant participation and engagement over the past two decades. This provided a theoretical framework for the study as well as a wide range of key learnings from research undertaken in the UK and other European countries. In turn, these learnings helped shape both the key research questions that have guided the research project and the concluding recommendations.

(2) Semi-structured interviews

In-depth semi-structured interviews lasting between 40 and 90 minutes were undertaken with seven representatives from five of the six Tier 3 AHBs (Tuath staff had already provided detailed information regarding the experience of their organisation – the sixth member of the Housing Alliance). Interviewees were able to provide knowledge and expertise from a number of perspectives, but all of them had direct experience of tenant participation/engagement. The interviews were guided by an agreed topic guide that was sent to participants in advance and provided a framework for the thematic analysis of responses that forms the core of the study. Given the constraints of the Covid pandemic the interviews were carried out virtually via Zoom.

An additional element to the methodology was agreed during project's lifetime. This involved an interactive stakeholder engagement session with representatives of the Housing Alliance on the emerging key findings and recommendations of the study that in turn provided useful comments that were taken into consideration in the final report.

The remainder of the report comprises four chapters: Chapter two examines the definition of tenant involvement and a number of important conceptual issues. Chapters three and four examine key literature from the UK and Continental Europe. Chapter five provides a thematic synthesis of the semi-structured interviews held with Housing Alliance representatives and, finally, Chapter six concludes with a summary of the study, the key principles that should underpin an organisation's approach to tenant engagement, as well as a number of practical recommendations.



02

Conceptual Issues

This chapter outlines a number of important conceptual issues that permeate the literature on tenant engagement. An understanding of these facilitates a grasp of the emerging discussion around approaches taken by social landlords and in turn the final recommendations emerging from this report.

Definition of Tenant Involvement

Tenant involvement is a mutual partnership between social landlords and their tenants. The *National Strategy for Tenant Participation in Scotland* defined tenant involvement as:

“Tenants taking part in decision making processes and influencing decisions about housing policies, housing conditions and housing (and related) services. It is a two-way process which involves the sharing of information, ideas and power”

SCOTTISH OFFICE, 1999.

Pawson *et al.*, (2012) distinguish between tenant involvement and resident involvement. People who live in social housing are sometimes referred to as tenants, customers, residents and/or service users. Often these terms are used interchangeably. However, use of the term ‘resident’ can also indicate a desire by social landlords to engage with households living in other tenures.

Tenant involvement spans a wide range of activities, including housing management, repairs and maintenance, community investment, corporate strategy, corporate finance, stock transfer, community regeneration and new stock investment (Mullins *et al.*, 2017). Research has shown that tenant involvement can bring about significant business, social, and community benefits (Bliss *et al.*, 2015), plus it is also considered to be ‘the right thing to do’ (Pawson *et al.*, 2012).

Housing design and place-shaping can also benefit from the direct involvement of tenants and residents (Kuronen *et al.*, 2012). Tenant involvement in decision-making may relate to local service delivery at one end of the spectrum through to decisions about strategic direction and policy at the other. The nature and scope of tenant involvement is largely determined by a landlord’s size, geography, and legal form. For example, housing associations in the UK are commonly set up as industrial and provident societies where shareholder membership is not restricted to (nor obligatory among) tenants. On the other hand, tenant majority boards are an intrinsic feature of co-operative organisations (Pawson *et al.*, 2012). In England and Scotland, the local housing company stock transfer model provided opportunities for tenants to govern board membership under this stakeholder governance model comprises of one third tenants, one third local authority nominees and one third independent experts (Pawson and Mullins, 2010). The Community Gateway model in England and Wales provides another example of tenant involvement at the highest levels of corporate governance, whereas tenant management organisations (TMOs) typically comprise tenant majority boards that work well at the estate level of governance (Mullins *et al.*, 2017). Furthermore, tenant involvement in the governance of social housing can make organisations more attractive to potential merger partners. This is particularly the case where merger partners consider involvement to be strategically and/or culturally aligned to their own business model (Pawson *et al.*, 2012).

Consumer versus Citizen-Based Approaches to Tenant Involvement

Cairncross *et al.* (1997) identified three main approaches to tenant involvement:

Firstly, the ‘*traditionalist*’ approach based on the principle of representative democracy, where councillors act as the conduit for communication between local authorities and their tenants. A central element of traditionalist relationships is a reluctance by local authorities to share power with tenants. It considers housing managers to be experts, which in turn justifies an approach to managing housing that has minimal, if any, input from the tenants.

Secondly, *consumerist* approaches that regard tenants as consumers of housing services and that therefore any involvement with landlords



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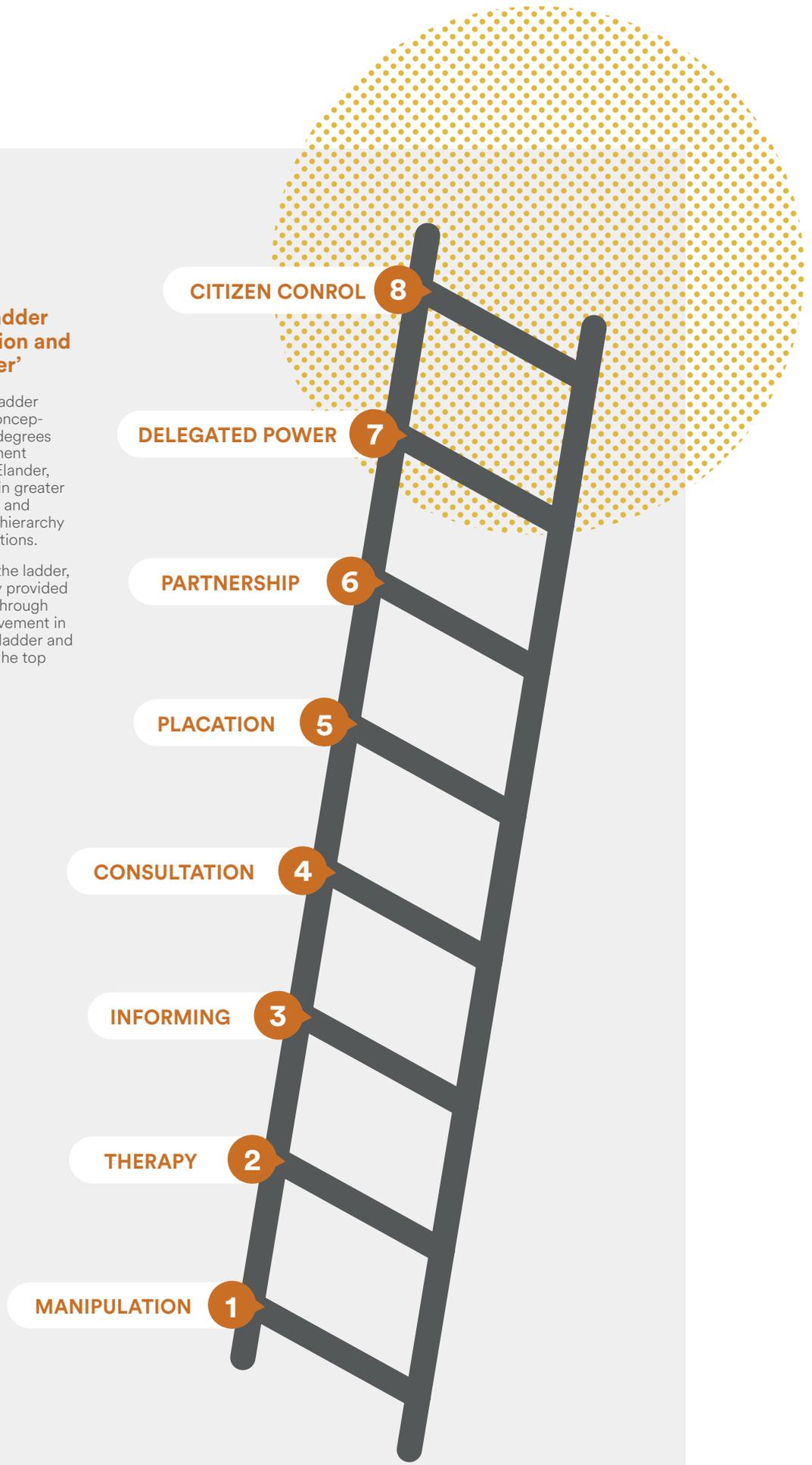
tends to be service orientated and individualistic. This individualised approach combines the rights of tenants with the consumer power of choice, often resulting in more commercial and transactional approaches to tenant involvement in larger organisations. Consumerist approaches can be considered an alternative to board membership, particularly as most social landlords find the majority of tenants unwilling or unable to assume non-executive positions or offer long-term commitments to their landlords (Pawson *et al.*, 2012).

Thirdly, the *citizenship* approach that seeks to empower tenants. It adopts a more participatory approach compared to traditionalist and consumerist methods. The concept of ‘social responsibility’ has also been linked to ideas around citizenship. For example, there has been a reconfiguration of tenants’ identity from one of passive recipients of welfare to self-governing, empowered, and responsible citizens. The trend in social housing governance towards ‘responsibilisation’ and regulating tenants’ behaviour has seen a shift from the so-called dependency culture and its over-reliance on bureaucratic and welfarist forms of housing management towards citizenship-based models of tenant involvement that concern personal conduct and social responsibility (Flint, 2004; Hickman, 2006; McKee, 2009). These different levels of tenant involvement can be usefully explored using Arnstein’s (1969) ladder of participation.

Arnstein's Ladder of Participation and 'Tenant Power'

Arnstein's (1969) ladder of participation conceptualises different degrees of tenant involvement (Gustavsson and Elander, 2016). Tenants gain greater levels of influence and control through a hierarchy of involvement options.

At the bottom of the ladder, tenants are simply provided with information through tokenistic involvement in the middle of the ladder and citizen control at the top (Preece, 2019).





Whenever tenants are appointed to board positions, they are often required to discard their tenant identity and accept certain responsibilities. In other words, tenants become “representatives without the means to represent”



Resident influence and power is relatively common in European countries, some of which have experienced a recent (re)emergence of ‘collaborative housing’, such as co-operative housing and self-organised housing (Czichke, 2018). These projects are strongly user-led, although tenants and residents typically co-produce their housing in conjunction with established housing providers. Nesta³ (2011) define co-production as:

“Delivering public services in an equal and reciprocal relationship between professionals, people using services, their families and their neighbours. Where activities are co-produced in this way, both services and neighbourhoods become far more effective agents of change”.

There are some concerns, however, that co-production involves greater levels of risk than exclusively professionalised service provision. However, service improvements, cost savings, and quality assurance can be achieved through user involvement (Bovaird and Loeffler, 2012).

Tenant board membership also falls within the ‘citizen power’ bracket of Arnstein’s ‘ladder of participation’. In countries like the Netherlands and England, it is quite common for tenants to hold a minority of board places, while in Denmark, board membership is the main vehicle for resident involvement and resident-controlled boards are the norm (Pawson *et al.*, 2012).

However, ambiguity exists about whether tenant board roles exist to provide a consumer perspective or a representative perspective (Cairncross *et al.*, 1997). Whenever tenants are appointed to board positions, they are often required to discard their tenant identity and accept certain responsibilities (McKee and Cooper, 2008). In other words, tenants become “representatives without the means to represent” (Clapham and Kintrea, 2000:547) as the fiduciary duty of a board member is to act in the interests of the housing organisation rather than as a representative for any particular constituency group. This has resulted in a drive towards board professionalism, which conflicts with the notion of elected tenants on boards. Moreover, the requirement for financial expertise and business acumen on boards can leave tenant board members feeling marginalised and inadequate about their own knowledge and skills (McDermont, 2007).

Other challenges relate to welfare benefit conflicts when board positions are remunerated and a need for investment in training and upskilling of tenants. Conflicts of interest and culture can also arise between the competing governance expectations that exist between tenants’ desire for local accountability and landlords’ drive towards management and business efficiency (Mullins, 2006; Bradley 2008). Nevertheless, there are alternative options to tenant board membership as being the most effective form of tenant involvement in social housing governance. For example, studies in both the UK and Europe have demonstrated that as part of the broader architecture of tenant/resident involvement, social landlords typically attached greater significance to organisation-wide tenant advisory panels, resident councils and customer service committees than they did to resident board membership (Bliss *et al.*, 2015; Pawson *et al.*, 2012).

A number of these concepts are explored in more detail in the next chapter that examines literature on tenant engagement in the context of the UK.

³ Nesta is a foundation based in the UK that acts to promote innovation across a broad range of sector. It was originally funded by the UK National Lottery.

03

UK policy context and academic perspectives



This chapter begins with a brief overview of the history of tenant participation in the social rented sector in the UK to provide an insight into the broad policy context that informed academic and policy debates in both the UK and Ireland.

This is followed by a review of some of the key academic and ‘grey’ literature on tenant participation in the context of the UK that provides a platform for Chapter four’s exploration of the tenant participation literature in continental Europe. Both chapters conclude by highlighting the key themes that need to be explored in this study.

Britain

Up until the late 1960s, the management of social (council) housing in Britain had been characterised by an essentially paternalistic approach. However, the civil rights movements that emerged in a number of western democracies during this decade had triggered an interest in tenant participation that was increasingly reflected in the day-to-day practice of managing social housing. In England tenant activism initially focussed on the 1972 Housing Finance Act that reduced Government subsidies to council housing, and in the private sector replaced controlled rents with ‘fair’ rents, thereby effectively reducing the affordability of all low cost rental housing.

There was also a growing awareness in Government circles that tenant participation could help address the problems of what became known as ‘difficult to let’ estates. This was reflected in the Housing Green Paper for England and Wales published by the Labour Government in 1977, which noted that “If tenants can have a greater



“Tenant Participation Compacts are locally negotiated agreements between council landlords and tenants, setting out how tenants will be involved collectively in taking local decisions on housing issues that affect them.”



say in running an estate, this will often make them more aware of the problems, and at the same time make management more responsive to their needs” (Department of the Environment, 1977:102).

The election of a Conservative government in 1979 did not derail Government commitment to tenant participation and the 1985 Housing Act enshrined a requirement for councils to consult tenants on housing management issues. Legislation to further empower tenants followed. The 1988 Housing Act (and its Scottish equivalent) enabled tenants to vote for an alternative landlord and introduced the concept of Housing Action Trusts (HATs) – non-departmental Government bodies that took control of local authority estates in order to develop and implement a strategy that combined physical and economic improvements. Tenants’ organisations involved in the programmes were generously funded and at the end of the programme tenants were given the choice of remaining with the HAT or returning to local authority management (Evans and Long, 2000).

The 1988 Acts also included provisions in relation to the Large Scale Voluntary Transfer (LSVT) of stock from councils to another landlord. These became popular with local authorities in the 1990s as a response to the significant reductions in capital finance from central Government. However, LSVT approval was predicated on support from tenants.

Government emphasis on tenant participation increased under the ‘New’ Labour Government that came to power in 1997. Indeed, Goodlad (2001) suggests that tenant participation was a ‘defining feature’ of New Labour’s housing policy and despite devolution of housing policy to the Scottish Parliament and Welsh Assembly in 1999

there remained an underlying policy similarity in all three jurisdictions that was reflected in a growing role for tenant participation in the assessment of a local authority’s performance in relation to housing services and greater involvement in shaping future investment priorities.

In England, for example, this was reflected in the ODPM’s *Sustainable Communities: Building for the Future* (2003) document that saw tenants in the social sector being involved in neighbourhood renewal strategies: “tenants must be at the heart of plans at all stages in the process, starting with drawing up options for investment” (ODPM, 2003:16). Tenants were also increasingly involved in a newly introduced ‘Best Value’ framework for governance of local authority services – guidance emphasised the importance of involving tenants and indeed other residents at all stages of a Best Value review (ODPM, 2005).

The introduction of a National Framework for Tenant Participation Compacts (TPCs) in 1999 was an important landmark in the relationship between local authority landlords and tenants’ organisations. “Tenant Participation Compacts are locally negotiated agreements between council landlords and tenants, setting out how tenants will be involved collectively in taking local decisions on housing issues that affect them” (ODPM, 2005:68). The framework that was originally published in 1999 and was updated and reissued in 2005 set out the core standards to be incorporated into the TPCs and the housing services on which they were to be based. The Framework document also stated that tenants were to be given corporate level support as well as the “information they need to participate effectively, including access to training, facilities and advice”. Tenant involvement was to be encouraged and tenants’ views reflected in local decisions, while tenants’ groups were to be “democratic and accountable and participate effectively as healthy, active organisations”. Performance on TPCs was to be regularly monitored and reviewed with the emphasis on outcomes rather than process (ODPM, 2005:9).

The emphasis in the National Framework was on council tenants, but reference was also made to housing association (Registered Social Landlords) tenants by signposting the *Housing Corporation’s Involvement Policy* for the housing association sector. This document emphasised the Housing Corporation’s expectation that all housing associations should have resident involvement at the heart of everything they do. Associations were expected to show how their services have been commented on and influenced by residents, and that responding to residents’ views was central to organisational culture and service delivery. It was for housing associations, working with their residents, to decide the best ways and means to involve residents. However, each organisation was expected to prepare a statement, in partnership with residents, setting out the aims and objectives for tenant involvement in service improvement and the expected impact on outcomes. Associations

had to review this annually by means of an impact assessment to indicate what differences tenant involvement had made (ODPM, 2005:14/15).

In Wales, commitment to tenant participation was enshrined in the Welsh Assembly's National Housing Strategy for Wales. In many ways the sections dealing with tenant participation reflect England's National Framework document. Key aims of the National Housing Strategy for Wales included widening tenant involvement to help underpin Best Value in housing; delivering "more efficient housing services with better quality decisions"; and, placing "tenants at the heart of the management of housing services in the future" (National Assembly for Wales:73). It also mirrored England's National Framework in relation to a commitment to put arrangements in place to engage with under-represented groups, including younger people, people on low incomes, BME residents and those with disabilities. However, it also recognised the "right of tenants not to get involved" (ibid.:63) and stressed the importance of not making assumptions about the level of interest in participation.

In Scotland, the Scottish Parliament chose to embed tenant participation more firmly in day-to-day housing management practice by making it a legal requirement. Articles 53-56 of the Housing Scotland Act, 2001 placed an obligation on both local authorities and registered social landlords to prepare a tenant participation strategy that encouraged the participation of secure tenants "in the formulation by the landlord of proposals in relation to the management of housing accommodation and the provision of related services by it". Such strategies were expected to include: arrangements for obtaining and taking into account the views of registered tenant associations and tenants on their landlord's proposals; the actual proposals themselves, including their likely effects; and, an estimate of the resources required (including financial and other assistance to tenants' representative bodies), to implement the strategy.

Social landlords were also obliged to notify tenants and their registered tenant organisations of any significant housing management proposals, proposed changes to service standards and their tenant participation strategy. The legislation also included provision for Tenant Management Agreements between approved "tenant management co-operatives" and landlords (local authority and housing association) that allowed the co-operatives to exercise "all or any part of the landlords housing functions"⁴.

Academic perspectives

The increasing Government emphasis on tenant participation in social housing in the 2000s and the concomitant growth in the number of local authorities and housing associations investing considerable resources in implementing Government guidelines gave rise to a number of significant academic contributions that provided a range of perspectives on the policy context for tenant participation as well as the conceptual and practical challenges of implementation.

Flint (2006) postulates that an emerging policy combination of tackling anti-social behaviour (ASB) and promoting social cohesion as important priorities for Government provided the real impetus for encouraging tenant participation in social housing. Following Malpass (2004), the paper argues that changes in social housing governance have "often been at the forefront of evolving governance rationales about the delivery of welfare services and the growing role of social housing in managing these 'problematic populations' is symptomatic of these trends" (Flint, 2006:173). Government regards social landlords as being well placed to be given responsibility for tackling wider social problems such as unemployment, benefit dependency and ASB. Social housing provides an institutional framework for Government initiatives that do not exist in other tenures and can facilitate social tenants becoming 'empowered' to take greater responsibility for tackling the social problems that have emerged at an individual and community level. However, Flint (2006) concludes that this approach, "although framed in a discourse of empowerment" has effectively created a 'subsidiarity' of responsibility where the burden of responsibility for addressing what are essentially wider social problems is transferred onto the most deprived communities themselves, despite the role that "more affluent communities play in contributing to residualisation and spatial containment of social problems within deprived areas of social housing" (Flint, 2006:177).

Hickman (2006) examined how tenant participation in housing in England's local authorities evolved during the 1990s. Using the typology developed by Cairncross *et al.* (1994)⁵ Hickman's analysis showed local authorities were increasingly adopting multi-disciplinary approaches that made the categorisation of local authorities into the three ideal types envisaged by Cairncross increasingly difficult. Hickman summarised the main features of each of the three categories as follows:

In *traditional* local authorities, tenant participation was limited by the local authority's reluctance to relinquish power. Councillors viewed themselves as the 'true voice' of tenants. Participation was often confined to situations where the local authority needed agreement from its tenants and was therefore "largely restricted to modernisation schemes and difficult-to-let estates" (Cairncross *et*

4 <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/asp/2001/10/contents>

5 See also Chapter two.



**By the start of the new millennium
“the tenant participation arena
had become more complex... many
landlords appeared to be adopting a
multi-faceted approach...”**



al., 1997:47). Key objectives were better housing management and greater levels of tenant satisfaction with tenants being viewed as ‘passive recipients’ of housing services.

In the case of *consumerist* authorities, tenant participation was seen as a way of ensuring better services for tenants as consumers rather than having an inherent value. There was a focus on providing better information to tenants, determining their needs on the basis of market research and regular (usually informal) meetings with individual tenants. Consumerist authorities, like traditional ones, aimed to provide better housing management and greater tenant satisfaction, but also to extend consumer choice.

In local authorities characterised as having a *citizenship* approach there was much greater emphasis on viewing the tenant as a ‘citizen’ and undertaking collective consultation. Citizenship authorities recognised the importance of “dialogue between the producer, consumer and citizen which is more than the two way flow of information involved in consumerism, but involves negotiations and trade-offs” (Cairncross *et al.*, 1997:32). A wide range of tenant participation structures were used to engage their tenants and there were often tenant representatives on decision-making bodies. Support was provided to tenants’ associations and in contrast to traditional and consumerist authorities, councils that could be characterised as having more *citizenship* tendencies aimed to empower tenants.

Using data from nine case studies undertaken by Sheffield Hallam University (1998-2001) and comparing this to an earlier study undertaken by Glasgow University (1987-91), Hickman’s analysis confirmed Cairncross *et al.*’s prediction that local authorities would adopt more consumerist approaches over time. However, it was clear that

in the early 2000s the approach that was still most prevalent was the *traditional* approach, an approach that could be seen in all nine case studies. In seven of the case studies a *consumerist*, approach was evident to varying degrees, while the *citizenship* approach that focussed on really empowering tenants was a significant feature in only two of the case studies.

By the start of the new millennium “the tenant participation arena had become more complex... many landlords appeared to be adopting a multi-faceted approach... and it was impossible to neatly categorise them into one of the three ideal types... traditional, consumerist and citizenship” (Hickman 2006:213). It is difficult to determine the reasons for this growing complexity, but Hickman argues that the expansion of tenant participation within council housing, triggered by government policy initiatives, resulted in a significant growth in the number of spheres of landlord-tenant engagement as well as the number of actors involved. Previously tenant participation focussed on a number of ‘housing’ specific issues such as improvements and planned maintenance. In the early 2000s the scope had widened to include “a wide range of service, management, policy, and regeneration issues” (*ibid.*:222). However, in conclusion Hickman argued that although these can be seen as important changes “the underlying power dynamic between local authorities and tenants... changed little during the period” (*ibid.*:222).

Hickman (2006) had highlighted tenant membership of local authority housing committees as an important characteristic of the citizenship model. McDermont *et al.* (2009) examine this theme in more detail in the context of housing associations where the equivalent would be membership of the housing association board or its decision-making subcommittees. Control over a range of services that had formerly been delivered by elected committees in the public sector has increasingly been transferred to management boards who oversee the work of professionals in newly formed organisations such as Registered Social Landlords (RSLs), and it is these boards that “monitor and provide strategic direction using a mix of professional knowledge, expertise and service user understandings” (McDermont *et al.*, 2009:677)

Drawing on a detailed qualitative study of the governing body of a housing association, established via the LSVT of local authority stock, the authors argue that this transfer heralded a significant change in culture: “primacy was given to operating as a business, and service users re-labelled customers, in an environment where large-scale private borrowing is the norm” (*ibid.*:678). The governing body comprised one third tenants, with the remainder being local authority councillors and ‘independents’. Two key findings emerge from this study.



Firstly, that board members, including tenants (based on National Housing Federation guidelines⁶), are required to 'shed their identity' and not represent any 'outside' interest ('the neutral allegiance model'). This means that tenants are constrained in terms of the roles they can play because their focus has to be on the 'needs of the business'. Secondly, although tenant board members are able to bring a range of expertise to the table, it was financial expertise and business acumen that became the most highly sought after skills in the post-LSVT 'business-focused environment'. In effect it is the senior managers in the organisation who, because of their expertise and resources, hold the power ('managerial hegemony'). The study concludes that a combination of these two factors had significantly reduced the potential for increasing tenant participation.

The somewhat critical findings in relation to the effectiveness of the role of tenant board members contrasts with the generally positive findings emerging from a number of studies that concluded that investing in tenant participation/engagement can produce significant financial benefits for housing association landlords as well as benefits for tenants and the wider community in relation to services in particular. Two examples are summarised below.

Bliss *et al.* (2015) examined the effectiveness of the Tenants Leading Change (TLC) programme that aimed to provide the business case for tenant involvement by furnishing an evidence base that would encourage social landlords to engage more effectively in the knowledge that this would benefit both them and their tenants. On the basis of a survey that elicited responses from more than 400 landlords and tenants (194 tenants and 210 landlords), supplemented by a more detailed call for evidence, workshops and 5 detailed case studies the report highlighted a series of key benefits:

Financial benefits – the majority of landlords did not highlight cost savings as the driving factor for investing in tenant engagement, but approximately one fifth of identified savings that were at least partially attributable to tenant engagement, including tenant led scrutiny of services, tenant involvement in tendering for new contractors and tenants undertaking activities that would otherwise have been done by staff or consultants. The savings highlighted by these landlords were estimated at £6.64 million annually (approximately £29 per dwelling). In the case of the five case study organisations where tenant engagement was taking place at a more intense level estimated annual cost savings were estimated to be around £94 per dwelling. Bliss (2015) noted that these figures did not take account of the resources needed to develop tenant engagement or the proportion of the savings directly attributable to it, but also that the figures may also underestimate savings in that not all savings may have been highlighted in landlords' responses.

6 "All board members share responsibility for its decisions. Each should act only in the interests of the organisation and not on behalf of any constituency or interest group" (National Housing Federation, 2004:8)



Involvement in shaping services at the local level, tenant scrutiny and tenant involvement in governance were seen as being the most effective methods of tenant engagement, more so than online engagement or more traditional forms such as surveys or market research.



Service benefits:

Almost all respondents referred to improved services that were more efficient and/or more tenant orientated. Often this was the result of a formal tenant scrutiny process (in relation to voids and complaints in particular), tenant inspections, or in the service delivery by tenants in the case of co-ops. Indeed, a number of landlord responses indicated that tenants could provide a higher level of quality control than consultants, while others highlighted the ambassadorial role tenants played in relation to other tenants once their understanding of the housing service had developed.

Effective methods of involvement:

Involvement in shaping services at the local level, tenant scrutiny and tenant involvement in governance were seen as being the most effective methods of tenant engagement, more so than online engagement or more traditional forms such as surveys or market research. Developing trust between tenants and the landlord organisation was critical to embedding engagement as well as involving tenants in the communications strategy, particularly with regards to more complex issues (such as welfare reform which was a big issue in Britain at the time).

Tenant management:

This was viewed as the most effective method of engagement by those with experience of tenant management organisations, emphasising the advantages of local tenant knowledge in helping to improve services.

Social dividend and community benefits:

Many respondents emphasised the intangible benefits, “seeing tenant involvement being a part of a culture of trust, accountability, transparency

and of partnership working between landlord and tenants” (ibid.:20). Others highlighted the wider community benefits of engagement, such as helping to develop mutual support networks, particularly amongst tenant controlled organisations. It was also seen as an important means of tackling isolation, particularly amongst elderly residents. Some respondents referred to tenant involvement as being a good way to involve diverse communities or to engage with young people.

Confidence, self-esteem and employability: Many respondents highlighted the improved confidence and self-esteem that develops amongst involved tenants, and some to their improved skills and therefore greater employability. Some also spoke of the impact tenants have on staff they work with, inspiring them to go the extra mile, and leading in turn to more satisfying employment.

Tenant satisfaction:

Many respondents reported that tenant involvement improves tenant satisfaction rates. The study recognises the difficulty of showing a direct causal link between tenant involvement and higher tenant satisfaction, but it reports that 38% of the staff from the landlord organisations who took part in the online survey highlighted improved satisfaction as a result of greater engagement. The case study organisations also all reported increased satisfaction over a number of years that was attributable in part to tenant engagement.

In conclusion the report highlighted that there appeared to be a “very limited clear understanding or articulation in the sector of business and other benefits delivered through tenant involvement” (Bliss, 2015:5). Landlords were more likely to refer to processes in place, such as scrutiny panels, rather than outcomes or benefits. However, in an increasingly more market driven environment it was becoming more important for landlords to clearly articulate the rationale for investing in tenant engagement and its benefits.

Four years on from this report and in the context of an increasing need to demonstrate value for money in which social landlords could be tempted to view resident engagement as a subsidiary business activity resulting in a marginalisation of the ‘resident voice’, Manzi *et al.* (2015) argues that this is an especially appropriate time to look into the benefits of involving residents. This study was commissioned by AmicusHorizon, a large social landlord based in London and the South East of England.

Based on six years of quantitative and qualitative data, Manzi *et al.*'s analysis provides evidence to indicate a strong and indeed strengthening relationship between involving residents and improved business performance. “Key Performance Indicators and financial accounts backed up by interviews with residents and staff have revealed properly embedded resident involvement delivers cost efficiencies and satisfaction” (Manzi *et al.*, 2015:3).

The benefits of engagement are shown to far outweigh the costs with case studies of two areas (procurement and complaints & the customer experience) identifying estimated savings of at least £2.7m p.a., attributable largely to resident involvement, compared with estimated resident engagement costs of £950,000 in 2013/14 across the entire organisation. AmicusHorizon achieved the accolade of having the highest levels of satisfaction of any large social landlord in the UK (97% overall satisfaction with services) attributed largely due to its redesigning and refining services on the basis of resident input.

The report highlights a number of more specific means by which this was achieved:

Having a constant feedback loop of resident input where residents are seen as “consultants and co-producers, designing, testing and feeding back directly on services” (ibid.:4). This is seen as helping ensure the delivery of high-quality customer services that neither over- nor under-serve the residents, thereby optimising value for money.

A ‘One Team’ culture embedded in the organisation in which staff, board members and residents undertake identical training and work towards a clear set of goals. This approach underpins everything the association does and has helped create a more productive working environment in which resident meetings dominated by ‘difficult conversations’ were conducted in an atmosphere of openness and trust.

Engagement must be genuine and acted upon so that residents really influence key decisions and policies.

Having a constant feedback loop of resident input where residents are seen as “consultants and co-producers, designing, testing and feeding back directly on services”.

Overall, the study concludes that “the benefits of resident involvement are clear. It has simultaneously delivered improved services, higher satisfaction and improved value for money” (ibid.:6).

Recognising the business benefits of effective tenant engagement, the Wheatley Group, Scotland’s largest social housing provider, commissioned Democratic Society to undertake a study that explored “new ways of tackling the long-standing challenges that the housing sector is facing regarding engagement” (Democratic Society, 2019:9). The study used a combination of desk-based research that included both international experience and good practice from outside the housing sector as well as qualitative information from Wheatley staff and a range of customers. Emerging ideas were discussed at a conference that brought together international experts on engagement alongside housing sector staff and customers. The study highlights the need to empower residents “to shape decisions rather than inviting them to respond to a set agenda and requires developing new ways of engaging that draw in those who have historically felt disconnected” (ibid.:6).

This report suggested a range of actions and activities to help fulfil this goal including: giving residents direct powers over how and where money was spent; facilitating engagement using both online and offline approaches, including adopting new technology as well as making it easier to attend meetings and creating new opportunities for discussion; co-producing services with residents, and implementing agreed changes iteratively. However, the report emphasised the importance of organisational attitudes: engagement must be genuine and acted upon so that residents really influence key decisions and policies. Rather than focussing on merely responding to specific concerns raised by a customer there should be an emphasis on changing relationships and building trust by “involving customers throughout the design and implementation of services, moving from simply consulting to actually co-creating solutions with them” (ibid.:6)

Recognising that there is no ‘magic bullet’ to ensuring effective resident engagement, the report concluded with a number of priority recommendations:

‘Easy sharing’: removing barriers to the data and information underpinning decisions, in a more open culture that makes better use of technology;

‘Rapid reaction’: building and maintaining trust by means of a fast, effective response to the questions raised and requests made by residents, focussing initially on the micro and building upwards - thereby demonstrating the credibility of the engagement process;

‘Customer empathy’: having ‘frank and fast’ conversations that deal with the immediate issues raised by customers’ complaints will consolidate trust more effectively than more abstract, organisational conversations.

Be an ‘enabler, not a disabler’: giving direct power over decisions on how things are to be done to residents. Building a community that generates ideas and projects that are then discussed with the housing body produces better results all round.

Later that year, Hickman and Preece (2019) completed a very comprehensive exploration of social landlords’ approaches to tenant participation that echoed a number of the conclusions and recommendations included in the studies by Manzi *et al.* (2015) and Democratic Society (2019). Noting that there had been relatively little recent research on tenant participation in the context of the UK the study was based on 10 in-depth interviews with a range of landlord types across the UK and 11 with stakeholder organisations representing professional bodies and tenant organisations.

Important initial findings that emerged from the study included, firstly, that language matters, but there was no agreement on the correct terminology for tenant participation/engagement and some participants argued that the focus should be on what was achieved rather than terminology. Secondly, most respondents agreed that tenant participation was crucial at both an organisational level and for staff individually. However, there were significant differences in how it was prioritised with a greater priority in Scotland (with its long-standing history of community-based housing associations) and Wales (where there were indications of a more ‘collaborative culture’) than in England.



All participants recognised the commercial benefits to landlords of involving tenants in decisions relating to the delivery of the housing services.



Hickman and Preece (2019) categorised the significant benefits of tenant participation into commercial benefits relating to the housing service, benefits to individual tenants and wider social benefits for the community.

All participants recognised the commercial benefits to landlords of involving tenants in decisions relating to the delivery of the housing services and this was the most common reason given for their organisation to undertake engagement – in effect reflecting the ‘consumerist’ approach identified by Cairncross *et al.* (1994). These benefits included an improved housing service, higher tenant satisfaction, better decision making, more effective resource allocation and the prevention of ‘over-serving’. Individual benefits for tenants included ‘voice’, agency and influence and the potential to empower as envisaged in the citizen’s model. Tenants also benefited from increased confidence and upskilling, and were therefore better placed to find employment, and overcome isolation. Increased social interaction, greater social cohesion and intergenerational interaction also helped to build trust between generations.

The study confirmed that approaches taken by landlords to tenant engagement varied considerably. The authors of the report distinguished both between *collective* and *individual* mechanisms (noting that the latter appeared to have become more common) and between *landlord initiated* structures, such as forums and scrutiny panels, and those *initiated by tenants*, such as tenant and resident associations (TRAs). The report also drew a distinction between an ‘embedded’ approach, where engagement was the responsibility of all staff, and the more prevalent ‘functional’ approach where it was primarily the responsibility of a ‘discrete and dedicated team’.



On an organisational level, organisational culture was seen as a key driver of tenant engagement and reflected “personal, ethical and moral beliefs about the importance and validity of tenant participation”



The study also found that the emphasis on long-standing participation structures, such as area-based TRAs, had declined in importance over the last decade. In contrast new mechanisms, such as digital engagement and scrutiny panels, had grown in importance with large landlords in particular having invested substantial resources in digital mechanisms.

More than a decade later the study reflected on the conclusions of the study undertaken by Hickman in 2006 (see above) and concluded that in 2019, too, landlords could still not be neatly classified on the basis of their approaches into ‘traditional’, ‘consumerist’ and ‘citizen’. Most of the tenant engagement structures utilised by landlords who participated in the study were consumerist – making use of tenant panels, surveys, mystery shopping exercises, and in particular scrutiny panels, to help them improve housing services. In line with the citizenship model, however, there was evidence of a number of approaches designed to empower tenants, e.g. participatory budgeting. In Scotland, in particular, community-based (and sometimes community-controlled) housing associations, have become an increasingly important component of the social housing sector. However, many landlords, and local authorities, in particular, still displayed elements of the traditional approach and were reluctant to relinquish control and empower tenants. These landlords focussed on a top-down approach and often distinguished between ‘influence’ and ‘power’, with their focus being on enabling tenants to influence the decision-making process rather than ‘empowering’ them.

The research also highlighted a number of constraints that made it difficult for landlords to empower tenants, including the broader political context beyond specific policy frameworks. The study noted a contrast between the political context in England and Scotland. The regulatory context was also considered an important driver of approaches to tenant participation, but with different outcomes in different national contexts. In Wales and Scotland, participants perceived a greater emphasis by regulators on tenant involvement. Some participants, but not all, noted the role of strong regulatory requirements in driving their approach to tenant participation, but one high-performing social landlord in Scotland argued that this was not the key driver, and that they would take the same approach even if the regulatory framework disappeared.

On an organisational level, organisational culture was seen as a key driver of tenant engagement and reflected “personal, ethical and moral beliefs about the importance and validity of tenant participation” (Hickman and Preece, 2019:9). The role played by senior management in setting the tone was noted as significant by a number of participants, highlighting the importance of looking beyond engagement structures as part of any strategy to embed engagement.

Hickman and Preece (2019) also deal in some detail with a number of key challenges faced by landlords: firstly, embedding participation within an organisation in a way that the responsibility for it was not confined to a specific person or team – noting that this meant challenging the views and practice of other staff members and recruiting new team members who placed a higher value on the culture of engagement; secondly, expanding the extent and depth of tenant participation to ensure that tenants’ groups were more representative of the broader tenant base and had the skills to engage effectively; thirdly, the need to adopt different mechanisms for participation, other ways for tenants to exercise influence than solely through landlord-initiated or controlled forms of participation; fourthly, it was important to recognise that not everyone wanted to participate, and also that barriers may relate to trust and a history of negative experiences, rather than the specific mechanisms for participation; finally, it was difficult to evaluate the impact of tenant participation activities, in particular the measurement of outcomes, value for money and ‘what worked, when, where, and for whom’.

Hickman and Preece (2019) concluded by setting out some key principles for effective tenant participation:

Key principles for effective tenant participation

Tenants need to be involved in determining the approach to tenant participation in their areas, perhaps through a ‘tenant participation compact’ that outlines the scope, remit and form of tenant participation.

The approach should encompass a range of mechanisms, enabling tenants to choose ones that are “compatible with their circumstances and needs and, in particular, the level of commitment (principally in the form of time) that they are prepared to devote to engaging”... This should in turn result in “more tenants being involved and tenant participation being more representative of the broader tenant population, with a greater range of voices being heard” (ibid.:50).

Landlord organisations need to examine their approach to “managing, and responding to, dissenting views and how they manage conflict in the participation process” (ibid.:50).

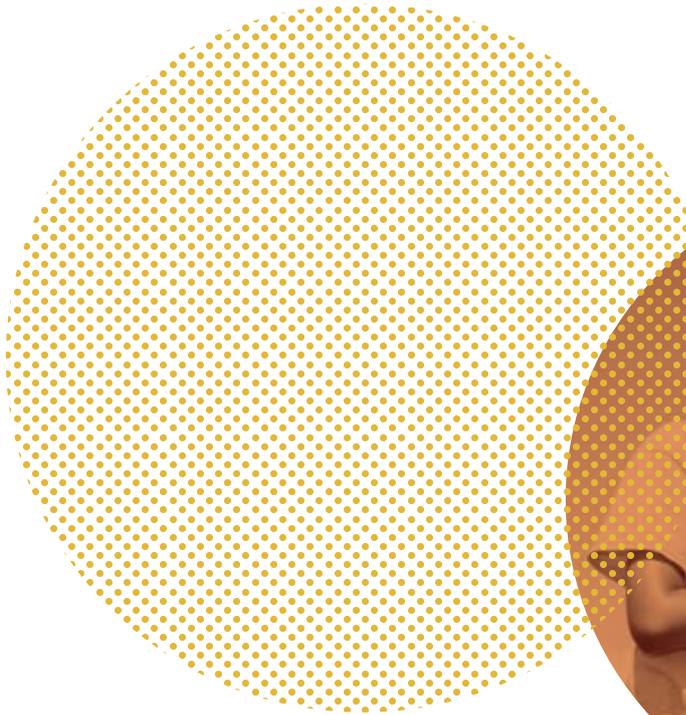
Formal tenant participation structures (such as TRAs) will continue to play an important role by providing an independent ‘bottom-up’ perspective. However, if a greater number of different voices are to be heard, then more resources need to be allocated to developing informal, more flexible engagement mechanisms.

Tenants must be able to influence the decision-making process in a meaningful, rather than tokenistic, way and in turn see the impact of their involvement.

Given budgetary pressures it is important that landlords evaluate what they do, not only to justify the allocation of substantial resources to tenant engagement, but also to provide a better understanding of the effectiveness of different engagement mechanisms.

Creating a specific engagement ‘function’ through the employment of tenant engagement officers, can be effective. However, this ‘functional’ approach can also create a barrier to tenant participation becoming ‘embedded’ throughout the organisation, and thus to tenants having a meaningful voice.





Tenant Involvement in Northern Ireland

Tenant engagement in Northern Ireland is influenced by a range of legislative (e.g. section 75⁷) and public policy drivers (e.g. the 'Together: Building a United Community' [T:BUC] Strategy⁸) as well as the Department for Communities' strategy on tenant participation. In 2016, the Department for Social Development (now the Department for Communities) published a 'Tenant Participation Strategy for Northern Ireland: 2015-2020' (DSD, 2016a) along with a 'Tenant Participation Action Plan' (DSD, 2016b). These documents challenged social housing landlords to enhance the extent and effectiveness of tenant participation in their organisations.

The Tenant Participation Strategy contained a commitment to establish a new Independent Tenant Organisation (ITO) and a Housing Policy Panel. In 2017, Supporting Communities was appointed as the new ITO, assuming responsibility for the strategy's implementation and the development of skills across the sector to facilitate and support more effective methods of participation. Furthermore, in its role as the ITO, Supporting Communities established the Housing Policy Panel (HPP) in 2017, which comprises tenants and residents who live on social housing estates across Northern Ireland. The HPP acts as a consultative body for the Department for Communities on matters related to housing policy and practice. The Panel also spent its first 18-months visiting landlords across the sector to learn about their different approaches to tenant engagement.

In 2017, a new Consumer Standard also came into effect⁹. As part of this standard, the Department

for Communities requires each housing association to publish its own tenant participation strategy. The **Consumer Standard** sets out three specific outcomes. The first requires associations to manage their organisations in such a way that tenants and other customers find it **easy to participate** in and influence decisions. The second outcome expects associations to provide quality homes and services **appropriate to the diverse needs of their tenants**, while the third compels associations **to support their communities by providing opportunities for tenants and promoting their well-being**. As part of these outcomes, housing associations must, inter alia, pay due regard to the Department's Tenant Participation Strategy, actively promote and encourage tenant participation, undertake and report on tenant satisfaction surveys, and have an effective complaints process in place.

As the strategic housing authority in Northern Ireland and a landlord of 84000 social homes, the Housing Executive also has a suite of strategies that promote and facilitate tenant engagement, including community involvement, community cohesion, community safety and social enterprise strategies. The history of tenant engagement in the Housing Executive can be traced to the construction of New Towns (after the 1968 Matthew Plan) where tenants did not want to live (Mullins et al, 2017). In present times, the Housing Executive has an agreement in place with Supporting

7 <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1998/47/section/75>

8 <https://www.executiveoffice-ni.gov.uk/articles/about-together-building-united-community-tbuc>

9 <https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/communities/dfc-ha-advice-overview-regulatory-framework.pdf>

Communities to promote and deliver tenant and community engagement through the formal Housing Community Network (HCN) structure. Formed in 1982, the HCN comes under the aegis of Supporting Communities and has a four-tier structure. At the **community level**, the network comprises approximately 500 community groups. These community groups and residents' associations effectively act as a sounding board for the Housing Executive and other public agencies on local community issues. At the **area level**, representatives from local resident/community groups form thirteen panels which scrutinise service standards, service delivery and housing related issues. At the **regional level**, five fora - based on the Housing Executive's five regions - are formed from representatives at the community level, which monitor and review key housing services. At the **central level**, the Central Housing Forum (CHF) is a consultative panel for key decisions that affect tenants and communities in Northern Ireland. It is comprised of representatives from each of the thirteen areas as well as hard-to-reach groups including representation from rural areas, people with disabilities, and young people.

The CHF also organises an annual community conference to share good practice and celebrate community success (Housing Executive, 2018). In recent years, it has also developed a lobbying role that seeks to inform and influence government housing policy (Mullins et al, 2017). The CHF meets with the Housing Executive's board twice a year although no tenant representatives sit on the actual board itself. Rather tenants' interests are deemed to be channelled through political representatives. For example, in 1971, the Housing Council was established by the same legislation that created the Housing Executive. This cross-party Council comprises elected representatives from each of Northern Ireland's councils and acts as an advisory and consultative body on strategic housing issues. Through the public appointments process, four Housing Council members are nominated to the Housing Executive's board.

Moreover, in line with equality legislation (section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998), the Housing Executive funds and engages with several hard-to-reach groups and has a consultative forum on equality which evaluates the impact of organisational policies from an equality perspective. Inter-agency partnerships comprised of statutory agencies, voluntary and community sector organisations and sometimes other social landlords also form part of the Housing Executive's community involvement infrastructure (NIHE, 2018). Such partnerships are often crucial in promoting community safety and community cohesion initiatives and in estate regeneration projects. Finally, tenant involvement is a requirement in new shared housing developments. As part of the government's T:BUC strategy and shared housing programme, tenants sign up to a Good Neighbour Charter which aims to promote good relations within these developments (Mullins et al, 2017).



Partnerships are often crucial in promoting community safety and community cohesion initiatives and in estate regeneration projects.



Previously, Birrell et al (2016) argued that the Housing Executive's approach to tenant engagement was more structured and coordinated than that of housing associations. However, since the publication of the department's Tenant Participation Strategy, associations appear to have bridged the gap to a significant degree. In one recent study, it was suggested that following its visits to landlords across the sector, the HPP had been particularly impressed by the work of housing associations and that in relation to tenant participation some associations "had been doing as much as, if not more in some cases, than the Housing Executive" (Shanks, 2022). Housing associations have undoubtedly made significant improvements to the ways in which they engage with their tenants since the publication of the department's strategy (although a number of associations already had strong histories of tenant and community engagement). Since the strategy's publication, housing associations have employed dedicated staff whose remit it is to focus solely on tenant participation. They have invested in training and skills development for staff and tenants alike to enhance the effectiveness of participation. Budgets have been ringfenced specifically for tenant participation activities and tenant participation structures have been modernised. Service improvements have also been achieved through consumerist approaches to participation, including tenant-led inspections, customer journey mapping and mystery shopping exercises (McNally, 2020).

In terms of housing association governance, boards have become more professionalised in recent years with greater emphasis increasingly placed on board members with private sector experience and business expertise (Shanks and Mullins, 2015). By 2021, tenant and resident board members accounted for only three per cent of all board positions across Northern Ireland's nineteen registered housing associations (excludes Co-ownership); of the two hundred and nine board members that served on housing association boards, only seven were tenant board members (spanning six different associations). Furthermore, in a session with members of the HPP, tenants and residents cited numerous reasons for tenants' lack of alacrity for becoming involved in governance roles, including boards being 'middle-class operations', 'a fear of technology', 'a reluctance to shoulder responsibility', 'lack of confidence', 'tenant vulnerability', 'a need for training and education', and 'the time commitment involved'. Some HPP members also felt that tenants had more influence by getting involved in grass roots initiatives or by serving on board subcommittees rather than the actual board itself. However, panel members agreed that the lived experience of social tenants was critically important and that this experience should be reflected in the board compositions of social landlords along with other professional skills and expertise (Shanks, 2022).

Finally, in terms of citizenship-based approaches that involve giving tenants more power, Birrell et al (2016:249) have argued that "the Northern Ireland narratives are weak on more conceptual underpinnings for participation, for example, the lack of discussion on co-production". However, it has been suggested that tenant empowerment in the Northern Ireland context may be more difficult to achieve in practice because of the region's historic links to paramilitarism (Mullins et al, 2017). Accordingly, any devolution of power to enable community groups to manage their own homes has not yet occurred in Northern Ireland nor has there been any LSVT to tenant managed organisations like in Britain. Tenant empowerment in Northern Ireland instead tends to be conceived as supporting communities to create employment through the development of social enterprises, social clauses in procurement contracts, and community service agreements - where community groups can be paid to deliver estate services on behalf of the Housing Executive (e.g. on void inspections, cleaning of low-rise blocks etc). Housing associations also have strong track records when it comes to enhancing financial inclusion through employability initiatives, accredited skills training and student scholarships for their tenants (Shanks, 2022). The biggest indication of a shift in tenant empowerment came in November 2020 when the stand-in Communities Minister announced plans to classify the Housing Executive as a 'mutual' or 'co-operative' organisation (DfC, 2020). Should this Ministerial plan come to fruition in the near future, these governance models have the potential to fundamentally alter the current landlord-tenant relationship and power balance.



Boards have become more professionalised in recent years with greater emphasis increasingly placed on board members with private sector experience and business expertise.



In conclusion, tenant engagement is well developed and structured in Northern Ireland as social landlords engage with their tenants on local and strategic housing issues. However, future policy direction and (potential) shifts towards greater tenant empowerment will be determined by the Department's next strategy on tenant participation as well as decisions on the Housing Executive's constitutional future.

Conclusion

This chapter began by outlining the evolution of tenant participation in the social rented sector in the UK – from its early roots in the growing tenant activism sparked by the civil rights movement to a growing awareness in Government and policy circles of the advantages of tenant engagement to both landlords and tenants. From the 1990s onwards, this was increasingly the case in all jurisdictions of the UK and was reflected in legislation and guidance that enshrined a growing role for tenant participation in the assessment of housing services provided by local authorities (and increasingly by housing associations) and greater involvement in the shaping of future investment priorities.

This provided a policy context for a more detailed examination of a number of important contributions to the academic and 'grey' literature on tenant participation in the context of the UK over the past two decades. Contributions from Flint (2006) and McDermont *et al.* (2009) highlighted a number of contradictions underlying the practical development of tenant participation. Flint argued that tenant participation in social housing resulted in the transfer of responsibility for dealing with what are essentially wider societal problems to the most deprived communities themselves. McDermont concluded that there were inherent tensions in having tenant representation on the boards or decision-making subcommittees of housing associations because they were constrained in terms of the role they could play.

Hickman (2006) used the tripartite theoretical framework developed by Cairncross *et al.* (1994) to examine the characteristics of the developing approaches taken by social landlords to tenant participation. He concluded that, to varying degrees, social housing organisations had adopted a multi-faceted approach that meant that it was difficult to classify them neatly as ‘traditionalist’, ‘consumerist’ or ‘citizenship’. However, he also concluded that there were clear signs that the consumerist approach that recognised the commercial benefits of tenant participation to landlords was becoming more prevalent.

Contributions by Bliss (2015) and Manzi *et al.* (2015) reflected this trend towards an emphasis on the consumerist approach that was demonstrated to bring with it clear financial benefits for the landlord, an improved service for tenants as well as wider social and community benefits that were all reflected in higher levels of tenant satisfaction.

The section on academic perspectives concluded by examining two publications that in many ways accepted these benefits for landlords and tenants as a given and focussed more on the ways and means of ensuring that tenant participation, or engagement as it was becoming increasingly termed, could be extended and embedded most effectively in a social housing organisation. Democratic Society (2019) stressed the importance of co-creation of solutions, access to data and information, organisational attitudes and ensuring rapid reaction to tenant concerns. Hickman and Preece (2019) having confirmed the continued pre-eminence of the consumerist approach highlighted the importance of the regulatory framework, the advantages of having a tenant compact, of having a range of mechanisms including informal and digital ones and protocols for managing dissent. This, perhaps the most comprehensive of recent academic contributions to the literature on tenant participation in the UK also highlights two important issues that are touched on in some of the other aforementioned contributions too: firstly, that the effectiveness of tenant participation is maximised by ensuring that all staff are committed to it and trained accordingly and secondly recognising that not all tenants want to participate.

Finally, the chapter traced recent developments in policy and practice in relation to tenant involvement in Northern Ireland. It highlighted the role played by the Department for Social Development’s Tenant Participation Strategy in prompting the appointment of a NI-wide Independent Tenant Organisation (Supporting Communities) with responsibility for strategy implementation and a Housing Policy Panel that acts as a consultative panel for the Department for Communities’ housing policy and practice initiatives. This section of the chapter also noted the new Consumer Standard that came into effect in 2017, aiming to ensure that housing associations facilitate tenant participation, as well as providing quality homes and services. The section also draws attention to the agreement between the Housing Executive and Supporting Communities to deliver tenant and community engagement and the NI-wide Housing Community Network that provides the solid platform for this at the local, area, regional and NI levels. The section concludes by highlighting the significant progress made by housing associations in recent years in relation to tenant engagement, but also emphasised that for historical reasons had to focus on a more consumerist approach.

These important conclusions, as well as other findings and recommendations that have been highlighted throughout this chapter, have helped shape the semi-structured interviews with the representatives of the AHBs in the Housing Alliance that form the basis of the analysis and findings set out in Chapter 5. However, before this, Chapter 4 examines the experience from continental Europe.





04

Learnings from continental Europe

A study of social housing providers in five European countries concluded that tenant/resident involvement had clear benefits for landlords, tenants, and local communities alike (Cecodhas, 2011). Several positive outcomes were achieved from residents' involvement, some of which led to material gains, while others were less tangible but considered equally as important.

First, tenant/resident involvement led to improved housing management as landlords were able to make better informed decisions about the needs and desires of their tenants. Landlords were also able to introduce initiatives and activities that corresponded with the expectations of their tenants and residents. Furthermore, resident involvement resulted in financial gains for both social housing providers (e.g. savings on management and maintenance costs) and residents (e.g. choosing where expenditure should be spent and not having to pay for services that were not required). Strong relationships between landlords and residents meant that residents were more willing to accept change, leading to improved housing management outcomes. Finally, embedded resident involvement helped social landlords to achieve higher levels of legitimacy with other institutions and partners (e.g. local authorities).

Second, resident involvement in the European case studies helped to improve residents' living environment. For example, opportunities were created for tenants to get to know one another, promoting community relations and enriching social cohesion. The research also revealed that the living environment improved when tenants and residents felt a sense of belonging and pride in their communities, and that residents took greater care of both their own homes and the communal areas that surrounded their homes.

Third, resident involvement led to overall improvements in quality of life. Landlords reported greater levels of resident satisfaction with the services they received. Moreover, residents were able to express their own opinions and even contribute to service provision through volunteering. This provided opportunities for training and personal development, building resilience and confidence in residents, whilst at the same time improving neighbourhoods and communities.

Despite these recognised benefits, there are a number of key challenges that face social housing organisations when they seek to involve tenants and residents in the management and decisions that affect their communities. First, there is the challenge of mobilising residents. Cecodhas' study found that it can be difficult to involve tenants and residents who are faced with difficult socio-economic circumstances and whose energies and efforts tend to be focused on *'the everyday struggle for basic needs'* (p.35). Also, those that are involved are not always representative of the wider tenant/resident population, with migrant, ethnic minorities, and other 'hard to reach' groups often less represented. Furthermore, young people and adolescents are a difficult demographic to mobilise and may require specific initiatives and/or technologies to attract more participation.

It was also important for social housing providers to have a strategic vision for resident involvement, setting out clearly what the organisation hoped to achieve through participation, the scope of the participatory practices, the roles and responsibilities of tenants and the landlord alike, and effective monitoring and evaluation tools so that improvements could be made to landlords' approach to tenant participation. Another challenge was that appropriate resources were needed to achieve effective resident engagement. Typically, these costs related to dedicated staff roles, training and information on the rights and duties of residents and the menu of involvement options available, as well as specific budgets assigned to TRAs. Most of these costs were normally covered by social housing providers. A final challenge related to a lack of confidence amongst tenants in their landlord. The report stated that trust can be engendered when staff build relationships with tenants and residents, and when residents can see that their opinions are taken into consideration and have an impact. The final sections of this chapter briefly examine some different approaches to tenant involvement in four countries in mainland Europe.



Those that are involved are not always representative of the wider tenant/resident population, with migrant, ethnic minorities, and other 'hard to reach' groups often less represented.



European approaches

There is a general trend across Europe towards more user involvement in the provision of public services. In 2010, the Social Protection Committee (the EU's advisory committee for employment and social policy affairs) adopted a Voluntary European Quality Framework that aimed to develop the quality of social services within the EU. This framework provides a set of guidelines that seeks to *'encourage the active involvement of users... in the decisions regarding the planning, delivery and evaluation of services'* (p.7). In social housing, tenant involvement is usually initiated through a mix of organisational culture, government regulation, and relationships between landlords and TRAs.

Denmark

In Denmark, social housing accounts for around 20 per cent of the country's housing stock, which is provided at cost price by approximately 700 not-for-profit housing associations. Housing associations in Denmark are a legacy of the large-scale cooperative movement that started in the mid-nineteenth century. They are semi-autonomous, regulated and subsidised by the state but owned and organised collectively by their members. Since the 1980s, tenants have had the right to hold the majority of seats on housing association boards.

There is a high degree of tenant involvement in social housing in Denmark, where the legal framework for tenant democracy in the management of estates can be traced to the beginning of the 20th century. The principle of tenant democracy in Denmark is one of the most evolved in Europe and essentially allows tenants and residents to participate in the management and administration of their housing estates. This requires a high degree of resident mobilisation and education, which is promoted and facilitated by the social housing sector. A wide range of housing courses are organised by the sector's

National Federation of Non-Profit Housing Associations (*Boligselskabernes Landsfoerning*), which are open to both housing association staff and local residents. The Federation also regularly invites residents to attend information sessions. It is estimated that five per cent of residents are involved as board members, ten per cent are involved in special committees, and approximately one third participate in the annual meeting of their housing estate.

At the organisational level, housing associations are typically governed by an eleven-member board, the majority of which are tenants. Non-tenant board members are normally local authority and staff representatives and independent experts. At the housing estate level, each estate is run by a board of (usually five) tenants, which is elected at an annual meeting. The tenant board is responsible for making decisions on rents, repairs and maintenance, budget approval, social activities, management of communal areas etc. Larger estates sometimes have sub-area boards in addition to main tenant boards that retain budgetary control for the whole estate. There is also a Tenant's Appeal Board, which adjudicates on disputes between tenants and housing associations (Cecodhas, 2011, *Pawson et al.*, 2012).

In terms of challenges, social and ethnic segregation has created some difficulties for Danish housing associations in terms of promoting resident involvement, as has recent mergers and trends towards centralisation. Furthermore, there are social problems with many of the large suburban high-rise estates, although in general there is no stigma attached to living in social housing (Engberg, 2000). There has also been a decline in the numbers of tenants participating in recent years with a need for generational change among 'tenant democrats'. In conclusion, tenant democracy is valued in Denmark, where tenants and residents have high levels of influence and control (Vestergaard, 2004), even though there has been a recent move towards professionalised governing boards in large housing associations (Mullins *et al.*, 2017).

Sweden

The inception of housing policy in Sweden can be traced to the mid-1940s when there was government support for a range of housing options through tenure-neutral preferential-loan subsidies. This paved the way for Sweden's tenant ownership cooperative sector and non-profit municipal housing companies; a defining feature of the Swedish Social Democrats' post-war welfare state. Housing tenure in Sweden comprises four sectors, namely owner occupation (41%), tenant ownership cooperatives (22%), private renting (19%) and public rented housing (18%). House prices in the owner occupied and cooperative sectors are set by the market, whereas in the rented sector there is a system of rent control in place. The term 'social housing' is not applicable in the Swedish housing context, although local authorities are responsible for ensuring access to housing for



Tenant and resident involvement in the Swedish housing system is principally exerted through the tenants' union and the tenant ownership cooperatives.



all citizens. Municipal housing companies fulfil this task and cater for all types of tenants. The housing companies are represented nationally by the Swedish Association of Municipal Housing Companies (SABO) (Cecodhas, 2011).

Tenant and resident involvement in the Swedish housing system is principally exerted through the tenants' union and the tenant ownership cooperatives. Founded in 1923, the Swedish Union of Tenants (Hyresgästföreningen) is organised on four levels (residential area, district, regional and national). The Union of Tenants negotiates rents for most tenants and both employees and tenant members participate in this negotiation process (Stenberg, 2018). The union has over half a million household members, including more than 12,000 elected representatives and over 700 employees. The tenants' movement in Sweden is also able to exert considerable influence on organisations' strategic objectives and the 'rules of the game' within which tenants and resident involvement operates. Funded by both landlord fees and members' subscriptions, the Union of Tenants also performs an important training and education role. All tenants are required to undertake specific training before they stand for committee elections.

In terms of Tenant Ownership Cooperatives (TOCs), they borrow to build the dwellings which they then own and manage. Individual households become members of the cooperative and form a tenants' board which decides on the building's management and refurbishment. 'Attached' TOCs are organised within one of two umbrella organisations, whereas 'unattached' TOCs are comprised of different cooperatives founded by the likes of building companies and municipalities.

The Tenancy Bargaining Act (1978) requires municipal housing companies to allow tenants to have influence over their housing as well as the



management of their company. Municipal housing companies also have an important role in tenants' participation, through the funding of structures for representation at estate level and their role in negotiating rents with tenants' unions. Furthermore, municipal housing companies conduct regular surveys to gauge resident satisfaction levels with their local areas, apartment blocks, and on service provision. They sometimes experience difficulties in promoting tenant involvement as these companies are often responsible for areas that houses higher concentrations of low-income households. Social and spatial segregation sometimes presents challenges in getting households to engage in participation processes.

Finally, in 2010, the Swedish Parliament approved the Public Municipal Housing Companies Act, which required these companies to operate on business-like principles. In other words, Sweden's 'third way' approach to housing provision integrated social goals into market processes. Social and commercial goals are now seen as complementary, which represents a shift away from the previous principle that required companies to be run on a cost price basis rather than for profit. In conclusion, tenant democracy in Sweden gives tenants and residents considerable influence and control over issues that affect their housing and local communities. Tenant democracy is underpinned by a permanent and well organised residents' movement, which has significant legal rights and access to financial and professional support.

Netherlands

Housing associations in the Netherlands moved from being membership-driven associations to board and management driven corporations in the 1990s (Jacobs *et al.*, 2015). Not for profit housing organisations in the Netherlands are of two legal forms: foundations (stichtingen) and 'associations' (verenigingen). At Annual General Meetings, resident members can influence decisions concerning the election of supervisory board members. Landlords are required by law to designate at least two seats to

residents on its supervisory board. However, due to concerns over possible conflicts of interest, tenants cannot be supervisory board members of their own association. Furthermore, tenant board members are expected to prioritise the interests of the housing association and not act as representatives for the body of residents that nominated them. Supervisory boards are then responsible for appointing the executive management boards of housing associations, which are responsible for both strategic policy and daily operations (Pawson *et al.*, 2012).

The corporatisation of the Dutch housing association sector in the 1990s following the so-called Bruterling (or 'balancing-out') agreement in 1993 saw social landlords become financially independent from the state. As they expanded their activities beyond traditional social housing, tenant-landlord relationships became more business-like and there were less opportunities for tenants to act in governance roles. This resulted in the need for a new accountability framework for tenants and society in general, which was ultimately introduced by the 1993 Social Housing Management Order (BBSH). This legislation strengthened the position of tenants in relation to tenant involvement. Tenant organisations were eligible to claim financial support from their landlords to support tenant involvement processes. Such support covered operational costs such as secretarial support, administration costs, and training and external advice. Under the BBSH, housing associations were obliged by government to publish annual reports on their performance in six areas, including tenant participation in organisational policy and management (Cecodhas, 2011).



Resident participation in the social housing sector in France is well-established. There exists a long-standing concern about the ‘quality of life’ and harmonious co-existence of neighbours and the vital roles that residents play in this process.



Moreover, the 1998 Landlords and Tenants Consultation Act (*Overlegwet Huurders/Verhuurders*) (amended in 2009) strengthened the position of tenants further (Lawson, 2011; Ouwehand and van Daalen, 2002). Housing associations with more than 100 dwellings were required to establish Tenants’ Boards to consult with the management of their association on issues concerning organisational policy (e.g. rent, maintenance, sales, demolition etc). In other words, the legislation enacted an advisory role for tenants and compels landlords to take such advice seriously. Since the introduction of this legislation, most housing associations now have formal participation covenants in place with their tenant board (Kruijthoff, 2008).

More than 200 housing bodies also adopt the Dutch Quality Centre (KWH) kitemark certification, which assesses landlord services and activities, including tenant participation, good governance, and environmental sustainability and social entrepreneurship (van Bortel and Mullins, 2009; Jacobs *et al.*, 2015). The KWH kitemark includes a specific ‘label’ for Tenant Participation (KWH Participatielabel), which specifies criteria for tenant involvement under four headings: (1) social landlords must have a clear vision on tenant participation; (2) adequate conditions must exist to support tenant participation; (3) social landlords must be accessible and cooperative; and (4) tenant participation should have a positive impact on organisational policy and activities. Housing associations that apply for this label are assessed by independent audit committees, which take account of tenant survey feedback and face-to-face interviews with staff and tenant representatives (Pawson *et al.*, 2012).

Moreover, tenant participation forms an integral part of the sector’s self-regulation. The Dutch national federation of housing associations (AEDES) (which accounts for over 90 per cent of social housing organisations) developed a governance code in 2007 which stresses that it is important for its members to involve tenants in decision-making. Although the code is not legally binding, members must comply with it and account for its application in their annual reports. Where associations fail to meet the requirements of the code, tenants may submit a complaint to the AEDES Code Commission. Finally, a Housing Act (*Nieuwe Woningwet*) in 2015 saw housing associations shift back to their original social purpose after episodes of administrative failure and financial mismanagement in the sector. The ‘Revised Housing Act’ introduced new rules for housing associations, forcing them to focus on their primary task of housing low-income households. It also introduced new opportunities for tenants’ associations to become more involved in the general management of housing associations, including tri-partite local performance agreements between municipalities, housing associations, and tenants’ organisations (Costarelli *et al.*, 2020; Czischke, 2018). These agreements seek to co-create policy solutions by linking the investment capacity of housing associations with the social needs of local communities. They also empower and formalise the role of municipalities and tenants vis-à-vis housing association decision-making, enhancing social legitimacy and improved social outcomes (Plettenburg *et al.*, 2021; Mullins *et al.*, 2017).

France

Resident participation in the social housing sector in France is well-established. There exists a long-standing concern about the ‘quality of life’ and harmonious co-existence of neighbours and the vital roles that residents play in this process (Hall and Hickman, 2011). Over 700 public and private companies and associations provide social housing in France. *Habitation à Loyer Modéré* (HLM) organisations are created by the state or else registered as HLMs with the state. Collectively, they manage more than 4.5 million social homes and house more than 12 million people. In total, social housing accounts for approximately 17 per cent of the overall housing stock. ‘Moderate’ rents are charged to HLMs’ low-income tenants. Tenants are surveyed annually and if incomes rise above a certain level, rents may be increased. In such cases, tenants are able to remain living in their social home if they pay the additional increase.

In terms of tenant participation, a National Consultation Committee (CNC) was established in 1986 to improve relationships between landlords and their tenants. The Committee is comprised of various bodies, including representatives from five tenants’ unions, the *Union Sociale pour l’Habitat* (USH), the national agency for information on housing, and the national housing agency. Collectively, they agree on housing policy issues (e.g.

rent increases, maintenance, upkeep of communal areas etc). In 2005, the National Authority for Consultation of Inhabitants brought together tenants, HLM federations and the federation of regional HLM associations to consult and debate housing issues in advance of the agreements introduced by the CNC.

At the organisational level, HLM organisations draw on customer service techniques to improve the quality of housing services to tenants (e.g. complaints processes, 24-hour call centres, tenant engagement staff etc). They also establish different types of agreements with tenants (e.g. neighbourhood agreements, rental agreements etc), which cover a range of housing policy issues. Some HLMs also have (elected) tenant representatives of the estate level or building/apartment level. Most HLMs also support grassroots community organisations to contribute to the development of good neighbourhood relations and use service users to improve the quality of services provided. Tenant administrators are elected by tenants to sit on the Board of HLM organisations and they have the same rights to vote, duties and responsibilities as other directors. Participation rates vary from between 20 to 28 per cent with elections held every four years. At least one tenant administrator sits on the commission responsible for housing allocations. Finally, the *Solidarité et*

Renouvellement Urbain law introduced in 2000 required landlords to promote tenant involvement and to produce rental plans in conjunction with tenant representatives. It also introduced measures to financially compensate tenant representatives to assist them to undertake their duties (Cecodhas, 2011).

Conclusion

The experience from continental Europe is that tenant involvement leads to improved housing management outcomes, better living environments, stronger relationships between landlords and residents, higher levels of resident satisfaction, enhanced social cohesion and community relations, and greater legitimacy with institutional partners.

Despite their different cultural, historical and organisational backgrounds, and evolving legislative and administrative contexts, social landlords in Denmark, Sweden, Netherlands and France have all adopted similar time-limited approaches to gathering views from their tenants and residents. These mainly include direct response techniques (e.g. surveys) that do not require any ongoing commitment from participants.

In terms of local service delivery, tenant and resident engagement in the four countries has traditionally focused on estate level initiatives. However, Sweden and France both have national initiatives like the Union of Tenants and National Consultation Committee, which negotiate rent increases and discuss changes to housing policy. In Denmark, (majority) tenant-controlled landlord structures mean that residents are heavily involved in strategic decision-making. Minority resident board membership prevails in the Netherlands, although to avoid any conflict of interest, participants cannot be a tenant of the social landlord on whose board they sit. Nevertheless, the main emphasis for tenant engagement has been to establish organisation-wide residents' panels and governing board subcommittees, which give tenants and residents input into different strategic issues and organisational growth priorities.

Several challenges remain, which have implications for this study, including: (a) mobilising tenants and residents at the national level, (b) engaging tenants and residents faced with difficult socio-economic circumstances, and (c) ensuring that selected participants are diverse and representative of the wider tenant/resident demographic, including migrants, ethnic minorities and other 'hard to reach' groups.

Chapter 5 will now examine the main perspectives on tenant engagement from the Tier 3 Approved Housing Bodies in Ireland.



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05

AHB

Perspectives on Tenant Engagement



This chapter of the report sets out the key findings from the semi-structured interviews that were carried out with 7 representatives from five of Ireland’s six AHBs in the Housing Alliance. The findings are set out in a thematic way that reflects the topic guide that was used as the basis of the interviews and focuses on key issues that emerged from the interviewee responses.

There is a considerable overlap/commonality in terms of the experience and perspectives of AHB representatives. However, there are also some significant differences in terms of degree and emphasis. This chapter provides a synthesis that aims to highlight both similarities and contrasts.

1 Understanding of ‘tenant participation’

Policy makers and practitioners have traditionally used a number of terms, often interchangeably, to encapsulate the wide range of activities and forums through which “tenants or others living nearby can influence a social landlord’s activities” (Pawson *et al.*, 2012:3). Respondents in this study were asked for their views on terminology and their understanding of what terms such as ‘tenant participation’, ‘tenant engagement’ or ‘tenant empowerment’ involves.

All respondents were aware of the different terminologies and the nuances in terms of what they encompassed that to a greater or lesser extent reflect the differing levels of influence exerted by tenants on landlords and are conceptualised in Arnstein’s ladder of participation (see Chapter 2). One interviewee described the term ‘engagement’ as “a huge word – it’s not just something that is done as an aside”, but also recognised that there is a hierarchy of options that reflect different levels

of engagement. At a basic level even housing officers engaging with tenants when they deal with issues such as ASB is an important low level form of engagement. However, this respondent also recognised that it is more of a challenge when it comes to “upskilling the community” that is such an important part of a housing officer’s tenant engagement role too, and explained that these higher levels of engagement are reflected in a new term (‘community connector’) that has come into use in England in recent years and expresses the engagement role well.

All research participants also had a clear awareness that whatever term is used, it covers a wide range of activities. One interviewee highlighted the fact that there is currently no accepted definition of tenant participation/engagement, although one was going to be included as part of their organisation’s forthcoming Residents’ Engagement Strategy – but included “giving tenants a role in governance, a renters’ voice, ownership of issues – it’s about empowering them”. Another saw it as “how we engage, communicate and involve our tenants regarding every service we provide throughout the organisation – how we empower and include them”.

Most respondents indicated that terminology was of importance and had a clear preference for the term ‘tenant engagement’ rather than ‘tenant participation’. A number of these respondents expressed the view that ‘tenant engagement’ is more suggestive of a two-way process, with landlords and tenants listening to each other, in contrast to ‘tenant participation’ which could be seen more as landlords reaping the benefits of passing responsibility to tenants for “doing work that we couldn’t do”.

One respondent justified the preference for ‘tenant engagement’ on the basis that it suggests more regular contact than one-off ‘participation’, and includes, for example, drawing tenants into the decision-making process on how the landlord actually “facilitates, prioritises funding and encourages it”. This sentiment was echoed by another respondent: tenant engagement is “more encompassing... it shouldn’t be a flash in the pan but an ongoing process that evolves with agreement from both sides”. One interviewee also highlighted the difference in nuance between tenant participation (“suggests [tenants] taking part in what the organisation does, but not getting enough say”) whereas tenant engagement “suggests empowerment and being part of the solution”. A minority of interviewees, however, felt that the terminology was not such a big issue and what was important was what actually happened in practice. One interviewee, for example, stated: “I don’t believe it really matters as it includes all of those terms [participation, engagement, empowerment]”.



Participants recognised the advantages of board membership despite the challenges of making it work effectively in the interests of tenants. However, there was also a recognition that board membership should not be seen as the ultimate test of a successful tenant engagement culture and needed to be introduced carefully over a period of time.



2

Board membership

One of the key issues that emerged from the rapid literature review was board membership – the fact that this was seen as a step towards the real empowerment envisaged in Cairncross *et al.*’s (1994) citizenship model, but also the need to recognise the potential conflict of interests that may arise for tenant representatives who, on the one hand, are bound by organisation’s rules on governance and, on the other, motivated by the desire to represent the tenants’ best interests. This section examines this issue and the range of views expressed by participants on board membership.

Overall, participants recognised the advantages of board membership despite the challenges of making it work effectively in the interests of tenants. However, there was also a recognition that board membership should not be seen as the ultimate test of a successful tenant engagement culture and needed to be introduced carefully over a period of time. In the case of one AHB with a long tradition of tenant involvement the legal requirement under its constitution meant that 60 per cent of board members are tenant ‘members’ that has ensured a “strong active participation from members”.

In the case of the other AHBs who participated in the study, board membership was seen as more of a longer term aspiration when tenants had received the training and experience to allow them to participate effectively as board members. One respondent noted that their organisation’s board had discussed the issue, but that it was “a long way from reality”. The organisation recognised that having tenants on the board is “the pinnacle

of tenant engagement” but were aware that “a large percentage of tenants currently wouldn’t have the skills to do that” and that the organisation was “currently trying to get tenants up to a point where they can sit on the board”.

In a similar vein, another respondent noted that a conversation with the board on this issue began in August (2020) following active participation of tenants’ representatives on the organisation’s Tenant Engagement Strategy Board. Board members with mainly finance and risk backgrounds had initially raised concerns in relation to potential conflicts of interest. However, these concerns were allayed following legal advice on the issues raised, leading to a better understanding and approval of the three-year strategy by the board, a strategy that included an organisational objective to have a tenant representative on the board by 2024.



The impetus came from a combination of top-down leadership and bottom-up activism. However, top-down influences appeared to be generally more important.



Likewise, another respondent saw board membership as being a longer-term aspiration that also needed to address the concerns expressed by current board members. Highlighting the organisation’s experience of working more closely with tenants, this respondent highlighted the “need to build capacity over years” and there is the danger that having a tenant on the board is merely “ticking a box”, arguing that in reality there is “more value from engaging with a broad range of residents rather than having one on the board”. However, echoing the concerns expressed by McDermont *et al.* (2009), another respondent highlighted the challenges of capacity building in an appropriate way that puts “appropriate supports in place [for board membership] without influencing the tenant in any way, otherwise it would not be effective – we would lose independent thinking”.

One AHB had already introduced a half-way house as an interim solution, with tenant representation on the board’s Housing Committee (rather than the full board). This representative was voted in by the

Tenants’ Forum who had undergone substantial training. The organisation recognised that there was some conflict of interest in relation to, for example, rent increases or confidentiality. However, tenant members “agree to confidentiality as part of their training” and were able to bring back any issues to the Tenants’ Forum for discussion, so “it’s not a big issue... what is important is getting the right people and training them”.

3 Origins of and impetus for tenant participation / engagement

The elicitation of interviewees’ understanding of the concept and practice of tenant participation and engagement, and in particular their views on tenant board members, laid the foundations for a series of questions that explored the origins, impetus and trajectory of the renewed interest among AHBs for more effective tenant engagement. The detail of these pathways varied from organisation to organisation, but there were a number of common threads:

The impetus came from a combination of top-down leadership and bottom-up activism. However, top-down influences appeared to be generally more important. Top down leadership appeared to be of particular importance, where, for example, senior management emphasised the importance of “listening to what the tenants were telling them and at the same time adopting a client-centred approach”.

There had generally already been a long tradition of more basic forms of engagement: activities such as ‘planting days’, clean ups or BBQs, tenants providing independent feedback to the landlord organisation through telephone surveys, focus groups etc. as well as in some cases undertaking more specific research into tenants’ views.

The requirement for a new approach was partly a response to the rapid growth of AHB’s in recent years – the realisation that participation/engagement was more straightforward when the landlord organisations were much smaller and when tenants had little or no say in the strategic direction of the organisation. A key factor, however, was that there was a growing appreciation among board members and senior managers of the business benefits of more effective tenant engagement. In most cases, too, a major review of tenant engagement had been carried out which revealed that there was little or no involvement of tenants in the organisation’s overall strategy and that a significantly new approach was required.

In turn these reviews were reflected in AHBs undertaking one or more of the following: commencing a new Tenant Engagement Strategy; the appointment of a new engagement officer(s) – with a range of titles – with the specific role of strengthening the organisation’s commitment to

tenant engagement and establishing or revitalising new tenant engagement structures, for example, Resident Advisory Groups.

Respondents generally indicated that the main focus of their organisation's tenant engagement activities was still improving services to tenants. Responsive repairs, in particular, remain a very important focus for engagement (more so than planned repairs), but also more cyclical maintenance activities such as grass cutting. Dealing with neighbourhood issues such as anti-social behaviour (ASB) and dog-fouling are also significant. However, it is clear that the profile of engagement activities has changed in recent years, with an increasing emphasis being put on engaging with residents on wider strategic issues, including the organisation's Tenant Engagement Strategy itself.

However, there was also a general realisation that there was still a long way to go. For example, one interviewee commented that there was "an awful lot more work to be done over the next few years".

4 Methods of engagement, including communication

Respondents emphasised the need for a multi-faceted approach to tenant engagement that encompassed a range of combinations of the following methods of engagement: face-to-face meetings (that were now gaining popularity again as Ireland emerged from the pandemic); walkabouts with tenants, estate level meetings, a Tenant Hub on bigger housing developments/schemes (with, for example, 2-3 hour 'clinics' each week where tenants can meet property and housing team officers at the same time); (virtual) meetings with Residents' Associations; (monthly) Tenants' Forums, Regional Advisory Groups, tenant membership of (quarterly) board level Housing Committees; membership of a representative body at the national level.

Telephone calls continue to be a vital form of communication as well as the growing use of SMS in more recent times. However, Covid has stimulated the use of virtual meetings via Zoom etc – meetings that can be held in the evening to facilitate working tenants. Organisational websites (including webchat) and newsletters provide a useful means of not only sharing information (top down), but also sharing good practice between residents living in different schemes in different parts of the country. Tenant portals to report a repair or pay rent are either in place or under development.

Tenant surveys also continue to be a vital element of the engagement process. One AHB carries out surveys three times a year. The housing manager analyses the data for their area and although residents are generally satisfied with services the housing teams drill down into individual comments

in the surveys and act on those.

One respondent had already highlighted the importance of good communication to the engagement process in the initial discussion of their understanding of tenant participation / tenant engagement: "communication is important, the better the communication the more engagement there is", something that became even more important as organisations became larger: there is a "danger that active participation and communication are lost as a result of growth".

There was general agreement that the main methods of engagement had changed with the arrival of Covid-19. The pandemic stimulated the use and acceptance of virtual meetings as an acceptable form of engagement and communication that enabled the participation and engagement with a broader range of tenants/residents, including those who worked during the day (and found it difficult to attend daytime meetings) and people living in remoter parts. Perhaps surprisingly, respondents made little or no reference to social media as a means of engagement, but there was unanimous agreement that face-to-face meetings were the most effective form

5 Recruitment and representativeness of tenant engagement bodies

One of the key questions raised by the literature review was the degree to which tenants' representative bodies were really representative of the estate or scheme, or at the higher level the county/ region or indeed national level, they were representing. All respondents recognised the challenges of achieving this, but also expressed the desire to improve representativeness on an ongoing basis.

AHBs have adopted different methods of recruitment. In one case all tenants are given the option of putting themselves forward at an Annual General Meeting, but there is a recognition that only a minority are interested in becoming representatives: "You can't force someone to be active, only give encouragement". Similarly, one AHB made all its tenants aware of the opportunity to join its Tenants' Forum via the organisations' Newsletter. In addition, their Tenant Satisfaction Survey asks the question: "Would you like us to talk to you?" – about becoming more involved. If there is a positive response, there is a follow-up phone call. In turn this can lead to housing officers identifying a tenant and engaging with them directly to see if they wish to become involved in a representative role.

In another case officers on the estates actively encouraged residents to become involved in a central Tenants Advisory Group. Potential representatives were contacted on the basis that

they had been vocal in terms of their feedback to Tenant Support Officers and provided with a script to guide them in their recruitment drive. This was followed up with a series of information sessions for those that expressed an interest and had resulted in a commitment from approximately 15 tenants, although following training over a period of months this “core membership” had stabilised at around 12.

A number of AHBs had selected potential representatives for the national advisory bodies on the advice of their housing officers based on their capacity to engage. For example, in the case of one AHB staff on the ground identified a number of tenants from across Ireland who they thought would be able to engage successfully at national level: “they were selected on the basis that they had displayed an interest in housing matters and had the capacity to engage – they were able to say their piece with confidence”.

Respondents had substantially differing views on the representativeness of residents who were members of engagements bodies – both in terms of their socio-demographic profiles, geography and their housing circumstances.

One AHB highlighted that there were clear shortfalls in representativeness in terms of gender, ethnicity and age. In some schemes tenant representatives are overwhelmingly men, whereas in others women are predominant. In urban areas there appears to be a large number of foreign nationals who take on representative roles. One respondent noted that: “representation tends to come from larger urban estates, is white and is available during the day”. Another respondent indicated there was no issue in relation to the age profile of tenants’ representatives in its organisation, whereas another noted that those who engage tend to be middle aged and white and predominantly women, and another that there was a predominance of “single men – very white and Irish”.

Engaging with ‘hard to reach groups’ is proving a particular challenge. One respondent provided good examples of very contrasting levels of success in this sphere. In one case, where a social housing development of more than 100 dwellings encompassed tenants from a variety of ethnic backgrounds, a regional committee with two chairs was established – one Irish and one representing the Muslim community. The provision of translation facilities and the dedication of the housing officer were key to ensuring successful ongoing tenant engagement. This success contrasted with another scheme with a high proportion of young people “with few options”. High levels of ASB made tenant engagement much less successful, although a triage system that identified the level of support required in relation to issues raised has helped mitigate the situation.

There are also differences in terms of the estate / development itself with one respondent reporting

higher levels of engagement in sheltered schemes, although noted that this may be primarily a reflection of their demographic profile – older people tend to be more engaged.

On mixed tenure estates engagement is almost entirely with social tenants. A number of respondents highlighted the challenges of engaging with private residents, for example, ‘pepper potting’ on Part V schemes makes it more difficult to engage with owner occupiers and private residents tend not to engage to any significant degree.

One respondent also identified a geographical disparity with engagement being ‘Dublin centric’. However, in the case of another there were “more responses to opportunities to get involved from rural rather than urban residents – which surprised us”.

There is no doubt that AHBs have a genuine desire to ensure greater representativeness in their engagement bodies, but this is tempered by a realisation that many residents do not wish to engage and a pragmatic response to address the issue: “We don’t want to flog a dead horse... as long as we are sure that in our surveys we get a good cross-section and can demonstrate that we hear hidden voices”.

6

Capacity building: training, funding and other support for engagement

A common theme emerging from the interviewees was the need for and importance of training of staff as well as tenants. In the case of tenants in particular there was a clear recognition of the need for capacity building – providing the training and support to enable tenant representatives to gain the knowledge and skills necessary to be effective on representative bodies, as well as providing the funding for this and the support to facilitate ongoing engagement activities.

A number of AHBs have commissioned outside organisations with the appropriate knowledge and skills (“experienced facilitators”) such as Community Action Network, The Wheel and Supporting Communities to work with potential tenants’ representatives and with existing or embryonic tenant engagement bodies, to help define what they would like the AHBs to do. There was also a realisation that it was important that these groups did not “lead the agenda”.

In one case the outcomes of these training and development activities facilitated by an outside organisation led to presentations at the annual staff conference and the establishment of a number of sub-groups with specific remits on ASB, Communications and the Green Agenda / Sustainability. The subsequent training allowed tenant representatives to feed directly into the organisations Greening Strategy and Residents’ Engagement Strategy.



There was also a general realisation that the focus of training needs for staff needed to change in light of the evolving nature of tenant engagement.



Another AHB emphasised the key role that an outside organisation had played in ensuring the independence of the engagement facilitator's role – “trying to chair engagement sessions yourself can be difficult... Staff can be concerned if they get negative feedback so it's better to have an independent chair”.

There was also a general realisation that the focus of training needs for staff needed to change in light of the evolving nature of tenant engagement. In the past there had been an image that engagement was about organising tenant activities, and training was focussed on customer services. This has had to change considerably with a much greater emphasis on the organisation's strategic role: “Traditionally [tenant engagement] was more of a community development approach... we are now trying to promote interest in other issues – gender-based issues or combatting hate speech”.

However, this overall awareness of the growing importance of more strategic issues was reflected in a range of ways across the AHBs.

One AHB was being cautious in its approach and had not yet introduced formal engagement training for tenants. Past experience had suggested the need to find a new way of working with representatives and indicated the importance of building up new engagement groups first before more formal training could start. In parallel it recognised the need to focus on training staff in relation to tenant engagement so that it becomes “part of who we see ourselves to be”.

This more incremental approach was mirrored in another AHB that had focused its skills training for its Tenants Advisory Group on IT skills and scheme knowledge (“taking it step by step”) and following completion of the organisation's Strategy and Action Plan will examine the training and support needs that tenants say they want to allow them to engage more effectively.

In one AHB tenants' preferences were already being reflected in the engagement training being undertaken. Tenants had expressed a particular interest in age-related and family issues. The training and expertise gained with the help of an outside organisation enabled tenants' representatives to participate in the procurement of 24-hour response support for schemes with older people – they were involved in the specification and tendering process.

Another AHB also highlighted the positive role that the pandemic had played in facilitating skills training for tenant representatives. Tenant board member skills training had already been underway prior to the pandemic, but the emergence of Zoom as an accepted platform for training events too allowed larger numbers to be drawn in. The AHB currently runs two courses each year – but the demand from tenants exceeds the limited spaces available and the content of the courses has evolved from focussing on high level board skills to community leadership skills.

All AHBs have set aside specific organisational funding for tenant engagement activities, including specifically the representative bodies, although these funding streams take different forms, and can include monies from grants or contributions in kind from local businesses. Spending on community events at the local level are agreed with the tenants' representatives on the ground.

In one case there had been a small sum set aside for each household to engage in community events as well as a more substantial organisational budget (more than €50,000) to fund more specific collective engagement roles at the strategic and local levels. However, in addition, given the clear recognition of the organisational benefits of tenant engagement additional funding could be made available if required. In another AHB – as well as providing funding for tenant activities and training – direct funding had been provided to the Tenant Advisory Group (TAG) in the form of its own budget.

In terms of funding tenants to support their involvement in engagement activities, it was generally noted that these representative roles were voluntary and therefore unpaid but financial support was available for travel and subsistence where appropriate. Indeed, there was a general reluctance to introduce direct remuneration for tenant representatives reflected in a number of comments: “I wouldn't like to see it going that way. It hasn't been an issue” and have dealt with this issue in other ways such as changing the times of meetings to suit residents. “Technology has made things easier – it has levelled the playing field... we pay out of pocket expenses (for attendance at meetings where appropriate) but no payment for time”.

7

Examples of the impact of tenant engagement

This section of the interview concluded by asking interviewees if they could provide specific examples of how tenant engagement had influenced organisational policy and/or practice in order to provide a broad indicator of the impact that the renewed emphasis on tenant engagement was making. All respondents cited examples of recent initiatives to demonstrate the improving effectiveness of tenant engagement in their organisations.

In some cases, tenants had been directly involved in shaping amendments to strategies (for example, strategies to deal with ASB on estates; to address the sustainability agenda, the organisation's Strategy and Business Plans, or, indeed, the Residents' or Tenants' Engagement Strategy itself), policy (e.g. communications policy, the complaints policy and procedures) and practice (improving the repairs service in particular) as well as the structures and format in relation to tenant engagement itself.

There appears to have been progress particularly in the field of communication where in the case of one AHB, for example, newsletter articles are predominantly written by tenants themselves. Overall, there were clear indications that all AHBs were moving towards a more resident/tenant orientated approach with input from representatives at the strategic, policy and operational level.



Overall, there were clear indications that all AHBs were moving towards a more resident/tenant orientated approach with input from representatives at the strategic, policy and operational level.



8

Regulatory Framework

Interviewees were specifically asked to comment on the influence that the current regulatory framework, including the introduction of The Performance Standard in 2018 has had in influencing their AHB's approach to tenant engagement. The responses were consistent and confirmed that the regulatory framework and The Performance Standard played only a minor part in the drive towards more effective engagement: "The Regulator didn't lead things, we were already on that journey".

One respondent commented that the "performance standards are very vague and compliance with the Standard was never a problem". Evidence of communication standards via letters, website and the AHB's formal tenant engagement structure were provided and ensured the required standard was achieved. Likewise, another commented that they had met all the standards to date, but that there was little in the Standard in relation to policies and frameworks and that the Standard "hasn't played a big part in developing tenant engagement". In a similar vein, an interviewee from a different AHB noted that "we ticked the box on everything". However, they also pointed out that measuring engagement by numbers is not particularly useful: "Bums on seats is not participation" and that there is a need to move to a standard that reflects quality rather than numbers. One interviewee commented that the Standard is quite broad and allows you to be "as ambitious as you want... you can be light touch, or you can fully immerse yourself in it... but it's not really strong enough". There was also an awareness that new standards were being developed that would be more detailed and more exacting.

A number of AHBs, however, did comment that the current regulatory requirements had been useful in gaining the support of board members who had a particular focus on financial matters, including audit and risk: "being able to say 'we must do this' was helpful".

9

Benefits of tenant engagement

Respondents consistently recognised the benefits of tenant engagement not only for landlords but also for tenants.

Respondents were very clear about the benefits to the organisation at the strategic level. Comments included: “Tenant engagement will help AHB X prioritise its work: where we should be delivering, what is wrong at present and any improvements- we are doing are what the tenants want”. If we get “buy in from staff and tenants” in relation to organisational plans, we “get to know what tenants actually need as opposed to sitting at a desk and deciding”. It “helps create communities and helps us improve the services we provide”. “If there is good quality engagement there is a reduction in ASB and arrears and it leads to more sustainable communities”.

There was also recognition of the benefits of formal engagement structures: “the TAG will help us achieve our objectives over the next three years”.

AHBs have also recognised and accepted the cost penalties of increased engagement as a price worth paying. One respondent commented that when housing officers engage on the estates it allows them to build a rapport with tenants that has a cost penalty in terms of staff time “but you get that back in well looked after properties”.

If we get “buy in from staff and tenants” in relation to organisational plans, we “get to know what tenants actually need as opposed to sitting at a desk and deciding”

However, one interviewee was also more cautious in relation to the benefits for tenants, noting that “our resident base provides us with the lived experience”, but that there was limited evidence on whether engagement with tenants provided benefits for them – particularly in relation to their housing circumstances: there hasn’t been “a huge amount of evaluation work done” ... “we measure things like rent and voids very closely, but we don’t measure the community benefits of tenant engagement... “We are attempting to understand the benefits”, but at least, “we get positive residents’ feedback that reflects our tenant engagement work and an element of trust”.



10 Overcoming challenges to embedding tenant engagement – Critical Success Factors

It is clear that all AHBs have made considerable progress in recent years in terms of committing to an organisational culture of tenant engagement.

However, there was also general agreement that a lot more needed to be done and that there were some significant challenges to address in achieving this:

“Tenant representatives are essentially volunteers and having the time to get involved can be a stumbling block”.

“If an issue is resolved it is difficult to keep tenants’ interest in engagement going. There would be very few who would be in it for the benefit of tenants in other estates or the wider good... it’s a big ask for people to give up their time to work on a policy that benefits all the tenants”.

Similarly, it is:

“difficult to get Tenant members to focus on overall tenants’ needs rather than individual estate issues”.

“Tenants’ involvement tends to fall away when there is a lack of momentum”.

“Tenants need to see tangible progress and see that their involvement is meaningful. There needs to be ‘meaningful contact’ rather it being just the odd time”.

Respondents also highlighted a number of ways their organisation has tried to address these issues, it is important the tenants:

“realise that they have influenced a change and are being listened to – they then feel empowered”.

“Having a good chair to lead the discussion and who gives them time to express themselves is important”.

“Tenants need to see tangible progress and see that their involvement is meaningful. There needs to be ‘meaningful contact’ rather it being just the odd time”.

There was also commonality in relation to addressing challenges concerning the attitude of some members of staff to tenant engagement:

“There are differences in staff attitudes in different parts of the organisation – e.g. Finance ask ‘what has TE to do with me?’ – that’s the role of the Housing Officer”

“It can be difficult to convince some staff of the merits of real engagement... even within housing management staff there are differences in attitude – some want to, others want to focus on arrears”.

“There will always be work to do internally... People talk about it in housing management, but it’s not a priority for other departments”.

There is work to be done as part of a process of spreading the:

“message that the tenant is at the heart of the process... [staff] need to see the benefits of tenants engaging”.

“Some housing officers love it [tenant engagement], others would run a mile from it... when recruiting we try look for these skills – that they have the ability to do it [tenant engagement]. We buddy the housing officers up so that they are more enthusiastic. We balance tough conversations with support. It’s a big thing when recruiting – it’s hard to train someone to do it”.

“Personality traits can play a role too... [engagement] has to be an organisational thing – a shift in mindset, pulling in one direction and not people working in silos... One of the ways to do this is to try to bring this into the focus of other departments such as asset management... by providing 360 degree metrics, looking at indicators like turnover, voids, etc. and their impact on budgets. This is how you can prove that there is a link with high performing estates [in terms of engagement] and low costs – the business benefits”.

There is work to be done as part of a process of spreading the “message that the tenant is at the heart of the process... [staff] need to see the benefits of tenants engaging”.

A number of what could be considered 'critical success factors' emerge from comments that came from the more discursive elements of the discussions that took place the end of the interview:

All staff should be involved in the training and education in this area, ensuring that both staff and tenants have the knowledge.

Focussing on a small number of really committed tenants who can act as a core group in terms of spreading the word.

Doing something that the tenants have told you about – showing it has influenced your decision making.

Improving communications and getting things done correctly the first time.

A highly committed Chief Executive who can bring board, staff and tenants with them.

Ensuring tenants realise they have influenced a change and are being listened to – empowering them.

“You have to make it meaningful for it to work on a national level - they have to see the value of their labour”.

“Giving tenants more power but keeping a light touch is the key to longer term engagement”.



All AHBs envisaged a further period of more intensive activity to further embed tenant engagement in the culture of their organisation but there was also some recognition that there may be limits to this process: “It’s a question of how far we go. Our tenants’ satisfaction is very high so why bother? It depends on which part of the organisation you are talking about. In housing services more engagement may be appropriate, whereas involving people in design may not be... If you go down the route of scrutiny panels, etc. that takes money... there is a danger we “can be too evangelical”. Another representative noted that “giving more power to tenants has its risks – if you aren’t careful you could create a power struggle between tenants... There is also no political will at present to let tenants gain power in any meaningful way”.

A number of AHBs also recognised the advantages of setting up a national representative body for tenants. One participant, for example, stated that “the regulator could encourage a national tenants group combining representatives from all leading organisations [AHBs]... something like TPAS or Supporting Communities. It would have the ability to influence government”.

The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and emerging from it were important issues for all organisations. “There is definitely a space for Zoom going forward. It played a vital role [in tenant engagement training], saved considerable financial resources and also took account of geography, facilitating the participation of people in remoter areas”. All AHBs see the way forward in a hybrid approach to engagement with Zoom and other virtual platforms supplementing more traditional forms of communication. However, most interviewees also specifically mentioned that they thought engaging with people face-to-face is the most successful means, both in terms of more formal settings and in more informal ones through tenant staff interaction: “at summer BBQs, and in community gardens and vegetable plots”.

Ultimately for one interviewee their view of the future was expressed as follows: My goal is to work myself out of a job [and be replaced by a tenant representative] “who has taken my role... the key thing is to upskill members to a sufficient degree”.



In Ireland, too, the different combinations of attitudes and practices in relation to tenant engagement reflected organisational history and culture, resources and geography, as well as the nature of the housing stock and its occupants.

Conclusion

The semi-structured interviews that formed the basis for this chapter provided a wealth of insights into the progress that Housing Alliance members were making towards embedding tenant engagement in the policy and practice of their organisation. Responses from AHB interviewees confirmed that in all cases there was organisational acceptance of the significant benefits of tenant engagement, both for the AHB itself, for the tenants/residents participating and the wider community. However, certain differences emerged in relation to the emphasis placed by the AHBs on a range of mechanisms to encourage meaningful tenant involvement, for example, in relation to the importance and value of having tenant representation on the board.

What also emerged from the interviews was that in Ireland, as in the UK, AHBs cannot be neatly classified neatly into the three models originally envisaged by Cairncross *et al.* (1994), models which formed the theoretical framework for the studies by Hickman (2006) and Hickman and Preece (2019). In Ireland, too, the different combinations of attitudes and practices in relation to tenant engagement reflected organisational history and culture, resources and geography, as well as the nature of the housing stock and its occupants. To varying degrees, therefore, each of the participant AHBs displayed characteristics of the traditional, consumerist and citizenship models, with the emphasis generally on the consumerist approach.

These issues will be dealt with in more detail in the concluding chapter where a more comprehensive summary of the findings and conclusions will shape the study’s recommendations.

06

Conclusions and Recommendations

This study was undertaken with the overarching aim of providing an evidence base for recommendations that could help AHBs in Ireland embed a culture of tenant engagement. It was commissioned by Tuath Housing with the aim of helping to ensure that tenants and their views are central to the work of AHBs.

A number of more specific objectives were agreed, including: undertaking a review of international academic and grey literature on tenant engagement to provide insights into good/best practice and the potential for its application in the context of Ireland; examining current policy and practice in Tier 3 AHBs in Ireland; and, making realistic recommendations that could help AHBs firmly embed tenant engagement in their organisation, as well as recommendations on the resources and structures required to implement them.

The previous three chapters provides the evidence base for this concluding chapter. Each of the chapters furnishes a synthesis of the evidence emerging from three key sources: firstly, research on policy and practice in the UK; secondly, an overview of approaches to tenant engagement in the significantly different historical and socio-political context of continental Europe; and, thirdly, the semi-structured interviews with Tier 3 AHBs who form the Housing Alliance.

Bringing these three elements together, there are a number of broad conclusions:

AHB participants in the semi-structured interviews demonstrated a good understanding of the concepts of tenant participation, tenant engagement and tenant empowerment. Some see these terms as more or less interchangeable, others view them as reflecting various levels of influence exerted by tenants/residents. Although there were indications that tenant engagement was currently the preferred choice, it was generally agreed that terminology was significantly less important than what actually happens in practice.

The origin and impetus for greater tenant/resident engagement in Ireland's AHBs varied somewhat from organisation to organisation, but top-down leadership was generally more important than bottom-up activism. The current regulatory framework had played only a minor role in the journey towards more effective engagement.

Reflecting the situation in the UK and continental Europe, the benefits of meaningful tenant participation are widely recognised in Ireland too. These include: benefits for landlord organisations (commercial benefits emanating from a combination of direct financial savings and improved services that are more in tune with tenants' needs and therefore greater value for money); benefits for tenants (higher levels of service that reflect tenants' wishes and therefore higher levels of satisfaction, as well as the potential to engender greater confidence and employability of tenants/residents); and, wider societal benefits (promoting social cohesion, the inclusion of diverse communities and generally better mutual support networks).

Likewise, there is a general acknowledgement of the challenges faced by social landlords in their journey to embed a culture of tenant engagement in their organisation. The challenge of improving the representativeness of tenant bodies and in particular involving hard to reach groups was universally recognised. These included to varying degrees meaningful involvement by older people, younger people, geographically isolated groups and ethnic minorities.

In contrast, there appeared to be somewhat different views on the significance of having tenant representation on AHB boards. The potential for a conflict of interest between fulfilling a role appropriate to the governance of the organisation, on the one hand, and acting in the tenants' best interests on the other was acknowledged. Some AHBs had found ways to minimise this issue, while for others board membership was not necessarily the most effective means of ensuring tenant empowerment.

Finally, it was clear that all Tier 3 AHBs are making concerted efforts to embed tenant engagement more thoroughly in their organisation. This is reflected in recent recruitment measures and in the examples given of where tenant engagement



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has had a direct impact on organisational policy and practice. However, there were also clearly differences in attitudes to the appropriate level of tenant empowerment. This is unsurprising and echoes the findings of Hickman and Preece (2019), who found that social landlords in the UK had adopted different combinations of mechanisms that were associated with the consumerist and citizenship models of engagement. In Ireland's AHBs too there is little evidence of the traditionalist approach, but, as in the case of the UK too, there is acknowledgement that many tenants/residents do not wish to participate in more formal methods of engagement and are generally satisfied as long as they receive a decent service. This should be recognised as a valid position and reflected in an individual organisation's approach to tenant engagement.

Recommendations

Bearing these general conclusions in mind as well as the comments emerging from stakeholder interviews and subsequent discussions, the study ends with a series of recommendations that could help to embed the culture of tenant engagement more firmly in Ireland's AHBs. These are separated into *key principles* that should underpin an organisation's Tenant Engagement Strategy along with a series of more *practical recommendations*.

Key principles

There is no right or wrong in relation to the optimal balance between the consumerist and citizenship models of tenant engagement. The combination of policy and practice chosen by the organisation must in the last analysis be a decision taken by the board, bearing in mind its organisational history, culture, resources and of course the views of tenants/residents.

All key stakeholders, and in particular the tenants/residents, are consulted in a meaningful way prior to the development of a Tenant Engagement Strategy.

Whatever approach, whatever combination of mechanisms, is taken to embedding tenant participation, it is vital that adequate resources, including additional support from central government, are made available for capacity building. Resources include not only finance, but also staff time to ensure that not only all board members and staff undertake the necessary training and education, but also that tenants' representatives are upskilled sufficiently to enable them to engage effectively. This will help ensure that the process of engagement does not become a disempowering process for residents in which they feel insufficiently skilled to contribute in a meaningful way.

It is also important, however, to ensure that residents are not trained and educated to the extent that they lose their independent perspective. Drawing in independent expertise from outside the organisation can help with achieving an optimum balance.

A 'One Team' culture should permeate the organisation in which senior management demonstrate a clear commitment to embedding tenant engagement and staff, board members and residents undertake the same training and work towards a clear set of organisational goals.

Evidence from the UK and Ireland would indicate that there are significant advantages to adopting an incremental approach to embedding engagement. Initial forms of engagement with residents' representatives may include softer methods such as 'mystery shoppers' or scrutiny panels (the consumerist approach) before drawing them into participation in representative bodies that necessitate a more significant time commitment (the citizenship approach). This also facilitates the indispensably necessary level of trust to be built up between residents' representatives and their landlord over a period of time. The journey from a consumerist approach to a more citizenship one can be accelerated by selecting an issue – such as sustainability – that transcends focus on individualistic interests that can often hamper meaningful engagement on representative bodies.

More emphasis is needed on the evaluation of tenant engagement in order to not only justify resources internally, but also on convincing tenants/residents of the value to them and the wider community.



A 'One Team' culture should permeate the organisation in which senior management demonstrate a clear commitment to embedding tenant engagement and staff, board members and residents undertake the same training and work towards a clear set of organisational goals.



Any regulatory framework for tenant participation should be 'light-touch' and adopt the principle of 'comply or explain', thereby giving AHBs the possibility of adopting a modified approach to tenant engagement that is in harmony with their organisation's culture and vision.

Practical recommendations

There should be a greater priority given to building *collective* engagement mechanisms reflecting the clear support among AHBs for a National Tenants' Forum that brings together tenant/resident representatives of all Tier 3 AHBs and that could be used as a sounding board for policy and practice initiatives as well as a representative body campaigning for better housing services.

This group could also be upskilled to provide a nucleus of 'champions', providing advice, guidance and support and play a key role in establishing regional or council-based forums. However, while it is important to ensure that these 'champions' have the necessary skills, time and energy to engage meaningfully they should not be 'cherry-picked' to the extent that they are seen as subservient to landlord organisation.

Increasing emphasis to ensuring greater representativeness of engagement bodies at regional and local level, including a focus on 'hard-to-reach' groups. Increasing diversity and ensuring that collective participation structures are more 'representative' will give them greater legitimacy.



Tier 3 AHBs could organise joint training programmes that cover key common engagement-related themes – thereby achieving economies of scale – while at the same time providing additional separate organisationally specific courses.

Tenants/residents should be involved in determining the specific approach to engagement, including the optimum combination of methods. This could be formalised in the form of a 'Tenant Engagement Compact' that sets out its scope, remit and form.

Face to face meetings with tenants/residents, collectively or individually, are still seen as one of the most effective ways of engaging tenants. However, there should also be a growing emphasis on the provision of alternative methods, specifically, digital methods. This will make it more likely that tenants will be able to identify a means of engagement that is compatible with their circumstances and level of commitment (particularly in the form of time). This should also lead to broader representation by facilitating a greater range of voices.

Ensure that relevant information is easily accessible and transparent for tenants/residents, enabling them to make more informed contributions to the engagement process. Addressing queries and concerns should be seen as an organisational priority with response times enshrined in organisation procedure.

Perhaps most importantly, for tenants/residents who choose to engage, it is vital that they are really in a position to influence the decision-making process in a meaningful way. This should include providing them with the opportunity to help shape the agenda rather than just responding to it. Tenants/residents must be able to see the impact of their involvement because, if they can, they and others will be more likely to engage in the future, thus helping to ensure that the process of engagement becomes an enduring one.



Perhaps most importantly, for tenants/residents who choose to engage, it is vital that they are really in a position to influence the decision-making process in a meaningful way. This should include providing them with the opportunity to help shape the agenda rather than just responding to it.



07



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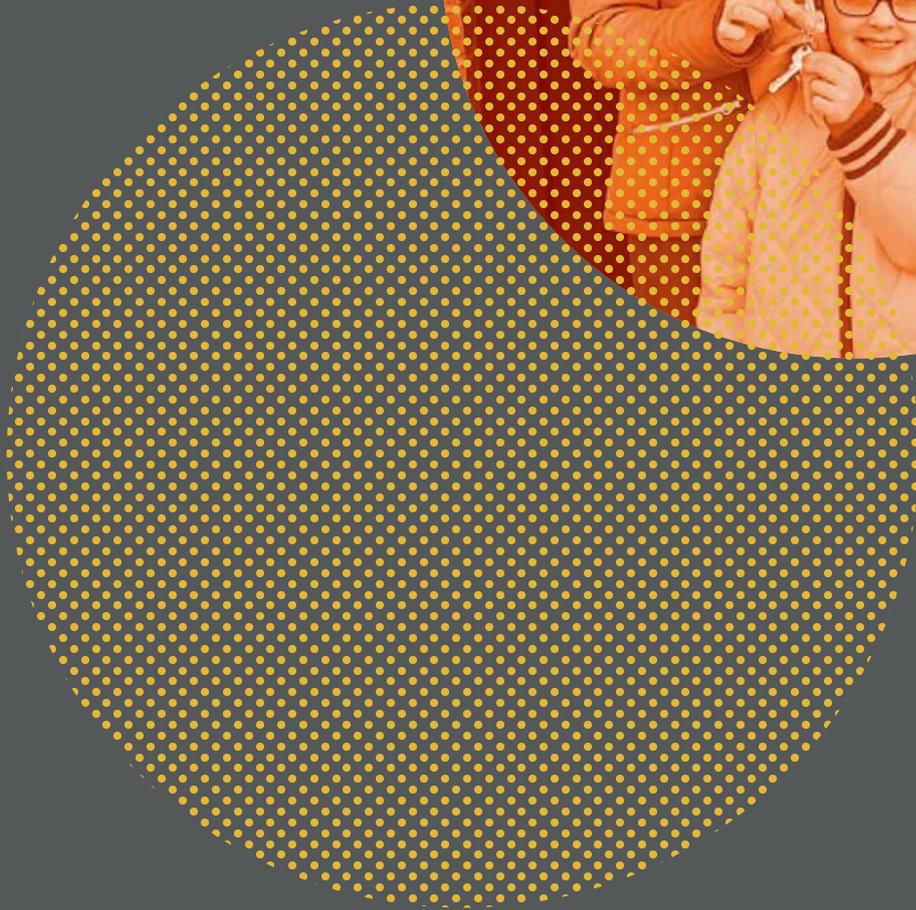
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