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Understanding approaches to tenant participation in social housing

An evidence review

Dr Jenny Preece (University of Sheffield)

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About the author

Dr Jenny Preece is a Research Associate at the UK Collaborative Centre for Housing Evidence, based at the University of Sheffield. Her research focuses on access to housing, housing choices, and neighbourhood change.

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Executive Summary

Introduction

This evidence review explores research into tenant participation in social housing. It discusses conceptual issues, approaches to tenant participation and how these have changed over time, and perceptions of the purpose, drivers, barriers, and benefits of tenant participation for different groups.

Tenant participation is 'a contested concept with different definitions' (McKee and Cooper, 2008, p.133). However, the idea that tenants should be involved in the management of social housing has been a longstanding feature of the system (Paddison et al., 2008), particularly in Scotland (Serin et al., 2018). For many providers it is considered the norm (Family Mosaic, 2015). The tragedy of Grenfell Tower has played a key role in changing the debate on social housing. Stirling (2019, p.3) notes that there is 'a sense in some quarters that the power balance between landlords and tenants needs to be recalibrated', and there have been a number of reviews, including of social housing regulation. It has been argued, for example, that the threshold for regulatory intervention in 'consumer' matters in England is too high, and that the 'serious detriment' test for intervention should be removed (Shelter, 2019).

Approach to the review

The key questions that guide the review are:

- What are the key conceptual debates that underpin research into tenant participation in social housing?
- How have approaches to tenant participation in social housing been characterised?
- What are the drivers of, and barriers to, tenant participation, for housing providers and tenants?
- What are the perceived benefits of tenant participation, for housing providers and tenants?

The review focuses on tenant participation in social housing settings, including housing associations and local authorities.

Conceptual debates in tenant participation

Academic research has been concerned with understanding the nature of power, the growing 'responsibilisation' of tenants through participation processes, and the ways in which incorporation within governance arrangements may impact on 'tenant identities'.

Hickman (2006, p.221) argued that even in organisations oriented towards citizenship models of participation, 'the desire by landlords to retain control over the participation process was a more dominant feature'. Power must be understood as a relational phenomenon; in other words, 'power exists and is manifested only in the relationships between different actors' (Cairncross et al., 1994, p.181). Power relationships have been explored through considering the involvement of tenants in social housing governance, as board members. This has been extensively researched, with particular focus on the 'responsibilisation' of tenants to fulfil the duties of active citizens (Bradley, 2008, McKee and Cooper, 2008, Flint, 2004). Tenant training – such as skills development for board members – has been identified as a key technique of regulation, since it seeks to direct tenants towards conforming to existing housing practice (McKee and Cooper, 2008). As such, it is argued that tenant board members in particular may face the regulation and realignment of their identity, which is 'riddled with ambiguities and tensions' (Bradley, 2011, p.27).

Organisational culture has been highlighted as a critical part of tenant participation. Pawson et al (2012, p.60) argue that whilst strong leadership that champions the cause of tenant participation within organisations 'may not in itself be sufficient to engineer a customer responsive organisation, it is almost certainly a necessary condition for success'. Research has also noted the importance of developing cultures of trust, accountability, transparency and partnership working in order to deliver effective tenant involvement (Bliss et al., 2015, p.16). It is through the promotion of these organisational cultures committed to resident involvement that Pawson et al (2012) argue that lasting gains could be achieved.

Type, purpose and focus of tenant participation activities

Tenant participation activities can be seen as happening along a spectrum of involvement, from the provision of information to involvement in the governance of social housing providers. However, many of these activities are landlord-initiated, and take place within participation structures created by landlords. It is also important to consider the mobilisation of tenants outside formal structures and processes of participation (Furbey et al., 1996).

There is some evidence of a shift in tenant participation activities, towards the use of technology and customer data analysis in order to tailor and improve services (Family Mosaic, 2015). This links to debates around consumerisation and individualisation in tenant participation, rather than focusing on collective voice and representation (Bradley, 2012, Jensen, 1998). Depending on the type of participation and the place in which it occurs within organisational structures, there are also debates in relation to the operational versus strategic focus of activities (Reid and Hickman, 2002, Family Mosaic, 2015).

Motivations, barriers and drivers of tenant participation

Tenant motivations for participation are diverse and may relate to a desire to be involved in improving the management of homes, or broader norms of collective voice and representation (McKee and Cooper, 2008). However, it has been acknowledged that some individuals and social groups may face barriers to participation, whether those relate to structures for participation (The Democratic Society, 2019), perceptions of lack of influence (Ipsos MORI, 2009), institutional atmospheres (Hastie, 2018), or practical barriers such as transport (McKee, 2009). It has been suggested that some barriers to participation may be bridged through capacity building programmes, (CIH Scotland, 2017), but others have critiqued such training for promoting particular notions of what it is to be a 'good' committee member (McKee and Cooper, 2008).

Housing providers also have defined motivations for promoting tenant participation, for example improving housing management functions (McDermont, 2007). It is also the case that whether or not organisations value tenant participation, it is a regulatory requirement, and therefore social housing providers have to support it to some extent. Reforms of the regulatory framework can therefore drive changes in tenant participation, and it is important to consider this across devolved nations as evidence of divergence grows, particularly in Scotland.

The benefits of tenant participation

The drive for increased tenant involvement in mechanisms of scrutiny have been linked to continuous improvement and value for money agendas (CIH Scotland, 2017). For example, in research drawing on six years of data from a large housing association, a 'strong and intensifying correlation' between involving residents and improved performance was identified (Manzi et al., 2015). This links to organisational motivations for promoting tenant participation, since involvement may align with other business objectives (Campbell Tickell, 2014). However, Tunstall and Pleace (2018, p.74) note that there is 'little recent evidence on the prevalence and effectiveness of tenant participation structures and methods'.

Areas for future research

- **Contemporary approaches to tenant participation** – there is less available research into contemporary approaches to tenant participation, tenant experiences of participation, and perceptions of the effectiveness of participation. In the Scottish context, Serin et al (2018, p.18) argue that ‘independent reports, or indeed any reports, on tenant participation and accountability in the modern era are lacking’. Given the devolution of regulatory regimes, there is value in looking comparatively across the UK.
- **Technological approaches to participation** – whilst there is evidence that some organisations are moving towards digital approaches to tenant participation, including the use of apps and social media (Family Mosaic, 2015), there is little robust or sector-wide research into technologies of participation (Marsh, 2018).
- **Drivers of change** – there are a number of reviews ongoing in the social housing sector, and post-Grenfell Tower there may be significant changes to future approaches to tenant participation. It also remains to be seen whether the reinstatement of rent increases from 2020 will restore organisational support for tenant participation, which some bodies have argued was reduced following the Rent Reduction (TAROE Trust, 2018).
- **Tenant participation in informal and claimed spaces** – research has focused more on formal and landlord-created or sanctioned structures of participation, but there is potential to add to this with an understanding of how tenants influence from ‘the outside’ and create their own forms of participation.
- **Tenant experiences of participation** – cutting across all of these areas, it is important to understand the range of tenant experiences of participation processes. For example, what are the experiences of tenants in relation to the different mechanisms for participation, including digital platforms?

Introduction

This evidence review explores research into tenant participation in social housing. It discusses conceptual issues, different approaches to tenant participation and how these have changed over time, perceptions of the purpose, drivers, barriers, and benefits of tenant participation for different groups. This introductory chapter outlines definitions of tenant participation, and sets participation in historical context. It then briefly presents the contemporary regulatory context, and recent calls to ensure that tenant voices are heard, valued, and acted upon.

The extent to which tenants have the power to influence and change the approach of housing providers has been a central concern of research into tenant participation, but there are contrasting ways of understanding power. The review will outline a number of the key concepts that underpin research into tenant participation, such as power, responsabilisation, and identity. The remaining review is structured into three main sections, which cover: 1) the type, purpose and focus of tenant participation activities; 2) motivations, barriers and drivers of tenant participation; and 3) the benefits of tenant participation. Finally, a number of areas for future research are identified.

Defining tenant participation

Tenant participation is 'a contested concept with different definitions... a catch-all label for a range of different forms and processes' (McKee and Cooper, 2008, p.133). Definitions range from the broad – 'collective action based on the local housing area' (Bengtsson, 1994, quoted in: Somerville and Steele, 1995, p.260) – to the more specific – 'resident involvement in social housing is about how tenants or others living nearby can influence a social landlord's activity' (Pawson et al., 2012, p.3). This report uses a working definition of tenant participation as: 'Tenants' involvement with decision making, policy changes, performance improvement, and community projects' (Campbell Tickell, 2014, p.10).

Whilst the report uses the term 'tenant participation', it refers to approaches which may be described as involvement, engagement, or empowerment (Campbell Tickell, 2014), and as Stirling (2019) notes, sometimes these terms are used interchangeably. In some cases, participation has been framed as tenants becoming involved in decisions about services, in comparison to empowerment enabling tenants to take greater control over services (Department for Social Development, 2016). In addition, although 'empowerment' is the term used by the UK government to describe how landlords should involve tenants, for some organisations 'empowerment' implies a level of responsibility for services that is more appropriate for co-operative or tenant-managed organisations, rather than housing associations more generally (Campbell Tickell, 2014, p.20). Finally, it should also be noted that there are different – and strong – views on descriptors such as tenant, resident, and customer, as well as on the relative importance of such debates (Regulatory Board for Wales, 2019). Despite this, there is recognition that language matters, since it 'expresses the balance of power and...can imply passive or active approaches' (Regulatory Board for Wales, 2019, p.14). For example, the use of 'customer' may be associated with more transactional and individualistic approaches, whether this is intentional or not. These issues are discussed in more detail later in the review.

The development of tenant participation in social housing

The introduction of British council housing was a struggle for decent homes at affordable rents, but tenant participation in its management was not initially a feature (Hague, 1990). Tenant participation as an activity sponsored by government can be traced back to the 1970s, developing as a response to perceptions of insensitive and unresponsive service delivery (Paddison et al., 2008, p.133), as well as strong political imperatives to incorporate parts of the growing tenants' movement within defined participation activities, in the hope of achieving 'bargaining and containment' (Hague, 1990, p.249). Political will is therefore an important part of the development of tenant participation within housing organisations (Hague, 1990).

There is diversity across the UK nations in respect of tenant participation. In Scotland, for example, there is a long tradition of tenant involvement in social housing (Serin et al., 2018). The prevalence of older community-based housing associations, and those emerging from stock transfers under the Community Ownership programme, means that Scottish housing associations are generally smaller and more likely to be community-controlled, contrasting with the model in England (Clapham and Kintrea, 2000). The development of tenant participation through 'community-based' housing associations in Glasgow from the mid-1970s, was positioned as a mechanism for tenants to access resources and steer neighbourhood renewal (Paddison et al., 2008). Within a decade this tenant-dominated model came to characterise housing associations across Scotland, and sets the sector apart from elsewhere in the UK (Paddison et al., 2008). Many housing associations are still membership-based organisations, open to local residents (Serin et al., 2018).

Whilst the idea that tenants should be involved in the management of social housing is clearly not new, from the 1980s tenant participation became 'a central part of social housing rhetoric' (McDermont, 2007, p.78). The importance of organisational cultures that promote participation through all organisational levels, and within all areas of operation, has been highlighted by research (Pawson et al., 2012, Bliss et al., 2015). For many housing providers, tenant participation is now considered the norm (Family Mosaic, 2015). Indeed, tenant participation in social housing is an official policy priority in a range of European countries, such as the UK, Belgium, Denmark and the Netherlands (Pawson et al., 2012). However, the form that participation takes, and the extent to which tenants are involved in different types of activities, varies markedly, as the review will show.

The contemporary regulatory context

Forms of tenant participation have been seen as developing in part as a reaction against paternalistic, bureaucratic, and hierarchical local authority landlords, but resident involvement is now 'a new orthodoxy within the housing sector' (Manzi et al., 2015, p.7). This is backed up by the legislative framework; under the current regulatory regime in England, registered providers must ensure that 'tenants are given a wider range of opportunities to influence and be involved' in a number of areas (Homes and Communities Agency, 2017, p.4). Housing associations and local authorities must support tenants to shape and scrutinise service delivery and hold boards and councillors to account (Regulator of Social Housing, 2018). However, because the 'tenant involvement and empowerment' regulatory standard is a consumer rather than economic standard, intervention would require breaching a high threshold (Manzi et al., 2015). In Scotland, the stated statutory objective of the Scottish Housing Regulator is to safeguard and promote the interests of tenants and other service users, with a stronger focus on the collection and publication of key performance indicators (Serin et al., 2018).

In June 2017, a fire broke out at Grenfell Tower flats in North Kensington, London, resulting in 72 deaths. This has been the trigger for a large number of reviews into social housing, including the regulatory environment and the extent to which resident voices are heard and valued. Stirling (2019, p.3) notes that there is 'a sense in some quarters that the power balance between landlords and tenants needs to be recalibrated'. Therefore, the tragedy of Grenfell Tower must be seen as having a key role in changing national debates around social housing, although the concrete policy outcomes are not yet known. For example, the National Housing Federation (2019) – the industry body for housing associations – is consulting on changing its Code of Governance, to include requirements for Boards to be accountable to tenants and residents, and to set out a new Together with Tenants Charter. Similarly TAROE Trust (2018) have called for tenant engagement and empowerment to be a regulated, enforceable, 'right' based on prescriptive standards. Others have argued that the threshold for the regulator to intervene in 'consumer' matters in England places too high a burden of proof on residents' groups, and that this 'serious detriment' test for intervention should be removed (Shelter, 2019).

The government has set out its expectation for providers in England 'to continue to work closely with residents in developing new opportunities to have their voice heard in decisions that affect them' (MHCLG, 2018, p.36). Current proposals include 'arming residents with information' through key performance indicators, which would be monitored as part of the regulatory regime (MHCLG, 2018). This would move English regulation closer to the Scottish model, which enables tenants to compare services (Serin et al., 2018). As will be discussed later in the review, there have also been calls for national-level representation for tenants, which could form a part of regulatory regimes (Campbell Tickell, 2014, Rees, 2018, Shelter, 2019, TAROE Trust, 2018).

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- What are the perceived benefits of tenant participation, for housing providers and tenants?

The review focuses on tenant participation in social housing settings, including housing associations and local authorities. The review has not specifically considered tenant participation in relation to regeneration and stock transfer processes, although some literature has been included where research also includes a discussion of tenant participation pre- or post-transfer.

Search protocol and results

In order to search for literature, search terms were set for each of the dimensions of interest (see appendix). The search terms combined: different terms for social landlords, and terms for tenant participation. Initial data searches were carried out in two bibliographic databases, Web of Science and SCOPUS. Searches were limited to: research articles available in English, and post-1990 publications. This date was chosen in order to capture some older scholarship which has been influential in subsequent conceptualisations of tenant participation, for example Cairncross et al (1994).

Initial searches returned 171 references once duplicates had been removed. Title screening reduced these to 45, and once abstracts had been screened 35 references were found to be within the scope of the review. Hand-searching of academic journals was undertaken. This was added to searches of research websites and key stakeholder organisations, to identify high-quality non-academic research reports. Hand-searching returned an additional 35 items.

In total, 70 pieces of research were identified for prioritisation. These were prioritised on a three-point scale according to strength of fit with the precise focus of the research (approaches to tenant participation in social housing), and robustness of empirical approach / strength of conceptual argument. When this ranking was complete, 47 references were given the highest rating (one), 12 were rated as two, and 11 as three. The review focuses on the 59 items of evidence highlighted as priority one and two. Overall, the academic literature related to tenant participation in the UK is dominated by research published between the mid-1990s and late 2000s, with less published on this topic in the last five years (of four academic articles, three were in international context and one a reflection post-Grenfell Tower).

Conceptual debates in tenant participation

Introduction

Research into tenant participation has used a range of theoretical frameworks drawing on work by Arnstein (Gustavsson and Elander, 2016), Clegg (Cairncross et al., 1994), Rose (Lee, 2010, Flint, 2003), and particularly Foucault (Flint, 2003, McDermont, 2007, McKee, 2011, McKee and Cooper, 2008). These approaches are all concerned with understanding the nature of power, the growing 'responsibilisation' of tenants through participation processes, and the ways in which incorporation within governance arrangements may impact on 'tenant identities'. Finally, the role of organisational culture – linked to issues of trust, accountability, and openness – has also been highlighted as a crucial part of participation frameworks.

Power

Arnstein's (1969) ladder of citizen participation depicts different rungs of involvement, from non-participation towards the bottom, tokenistic involvement in the middle, and citizen power at the top. Critics argue that the theory conflates participation practices with the achievement of power, with tenant board membership at the pinnacle of both (Bradley, 2008). However, the formal presence of tenants within governance structures is not a guarantee of influence (Marsh, 2018). Bradley (2013) also argues that many wider approaches to tenant participation, such as feedback forms or consumer panels, actually reinforce the power of the landlord or housing provider, because they are in control of the manner of deliberation and often select the participants involved. Cairncross et al (1994, p.182) noted that these structures of participation are only one part of a more complex phenomenon, analysis of which must include the 'rules of the game' within these structures. It has been argued that the process of participation, the relationships between key actors, and the wider political culture, are actually more important than formal structures of participation (Cairncross et al., 1994).

Cairncross et al's (1994) typology of tenant participation in local authorities classified authorities as 'consumerist' (focusing on consultation and service issues), 'traditional' (landlords controlling participation, with involvement in day-to-day matters), and 'citizenship' (greater tenant control, such as through devolved budgets). Revisiting this, Hickman (2006, p.218) found that all the case study landlords in their research exhibited traditional characteristics to some extent, and this was characterised by a reluctance to share power with residents and a commitment to retaining control over participation processes. Indeed, even in organisations that had the strongest orientation towards a citizenship model of participation, 'the desire by landlords to retain control over the participation process was a more dominant feature' (Hickman, 2006, p.221). Other organisations, spending a relatively higher proportion of income on tenant participation, have recognised that participation could not always be 'controlled' and that it would bring changes to organisations (Beckford et al., 2003).

In Scotland, it has been argued that the local scale of community-based housing organisations offers the potential for greater accessibility to citizens, and therefore for greater levels of accountability. Considering this issue in Glasgow, Clapham and Kintrea (2000) argued that community-based housing association models did attract participation from a substantial proportion of residents, and – being governed by local people – were perceived as more accountable to other residents because of committee members' visibility and regular contact within the community. This cannot be the same for regional or national housing organisations, or local authorities, yet there were trade-offs associated with greater accountability to local citizens, in the strategic power of smaller organisations in partnerships with local and national organisations (Clapham and Kintrea, 2000).

Whilst there are many ways of understanding power, in research on tenant participation it is typically treated as a relational phenomenon; in other words, 'power exists and is manifested only in the relationships between different actors' (Cairncross et al., 1994, p.181). McKee (2011, p.1) argues that it is necessary to consider the 'messy empirical actualities of governing in situ', rather than relying on text-based discourse analysis. There is also a spatial dimension to the operation of power, taking place in different arenas. These spaces may be 'closed' (controlled by an elite group), 'invited' (in which the public are invited to participate), or 'claimed' (newly created by those outside other structures) (Muir and McMahan, 2015, p.20).

Somerville (1998, p.234) argues that housing-related empowerment is 'any process by which people gain increased control over their housing situation', and that 'participation without empowerment is... a confidence trick performed by the controllers of an activity on participants in that activity'. Processes of empowerment can be both top down, starting with those who have power, and bottom up, starting with those who are seeking power (Somerville, 1998). These processes can also be conservative, in that they tend to conserve existing structures, radical, in that they break up institutional structures and create separate new power bases, or reformist, seeking to reform existing institutions (Somerville, 1998).

However, McKee nuances this perspective, noting that empowerment 'is itself a mode of subjection and means of regulating conduct' (McKee, 2011, p.134). For example, strategies to 'empower' individuals are concerned with directing conduct towards particular ends, and therefore are fundamentally relationships of power (McKee, 2011). As such, notions of tenant empowerment embody regulatory as well as liberatory possibilities (McKee and Cooper, 2008, p.133). By conceptualising citizens in terms of their willingness to act, those who do not are problematised, and constructed as apathetic, alienated or excluded (McKee, 2011, McKee, 2009). This can also lead to the fracturing of tenant population between the 'responsible' participators and the 'negligent' members of the community who opted out of participation processes (McKee, 2009, p.29). Also drawing on Foucault, McDermont (2007) similarly highlights that power is not only – or principally – exercised through domination, but through numerous processes, including those operated by ourselves. Focusing on domination can therefore obscure the everyday, mundane relations through which power is exercised (McDermont, 2007p.85).

Responsibilisation

The above discussion suggests that whilst structures of tenant participation have changed, issues of control still remain. The involvement of tenants in social housing governance, for example through board membership, has been extensively researched, with particular focus on the 'responsibilisation' of tenants to fulfil the duties of active citizens (Bradley, 2008, McKee and Cooper, 2008, Flint, 2004). The realignment of housing governance, involving a greater role for tenants, responds to a number of rationales, not only the perceived benefits of choice, efficiency and consumer satisfaction, but also moral rationalities of increasing civic engagement by shaping the conduct of tenants (Flint, 2003). Governmental objectives are therefore achieved not through direct intervention, but through realigning subjects' identities and directing self-regulation towards governmental aims (Flint, 2003).

Participation in housing management can therefore be, in part, theorised as a responsibilising strategy, through which behavioural norms are transmitted, promoting tenants to regulate their own behaviour in order to participate as responsible subjects (Bradley, 2013, p.385). For non-executive board members, there is an added dimension because of the need to meet particular legal duties. Whilst tenant training – such as skills development – can help individuals to meet these requirements, it has also been identified as a key technique of regulation, since it seeks to direct tenants towards regulating their own behaviour and conforming to existing housing practice (McKee and Cooper, 2008). Through participation, new assemblages of governance are then created, in which residents go on to shape the conduct of other tenants through their governing role (Flint, 2003). However, research has also highlighted the ways in which tenants can misdirect these discourses and re-imagine their relationship with their housing provider (Bradley, 2013). For example, although the professionalisation of tenants can be associated with a loss of oppositional voices, the acquisition of elite knowledge can also be applied by tenants to undermine the power of those elites (Bradley, 2012, p.1134).

Identity

Whether these responsabilising processes act to change tenant identities has also been a focus of some research. Tenant board members in particular have been seen as facing a challenge to maintain their own identity as tenants, rather than being co-opted into the machine of corporate governance (McDermont, 2007, p.89). Using Butler's framework, Bradley (2011, p.20) argues that the discourse of housing governance can be understood as a productive force in constituting and destabilising identities among tenant directors. Tenant board members are encouraged to align their objectives with those of housing organisations, with recognition offered through the adoption of this 'regulated identity', which is 'riddled with ambiguities and tensions' (Bradley, 2011, p.27). Tenant board members are therefore theorised as constituted subjects, who find 'both recognition and repudiation in a governance role' in which they are a flawed reflection of the image of the director (Bradley, 2011, p.35).

If the behaviour of an organisation as a whole is the result of bargaining between different social groups, then groups' abilities to affect the construction of meaning and 'common sense' is affected by their power and ability to dominate the discursive space (Bradley, 2008, p.886). Discursive processes result in the creation of a collective identity, shared 'common sense' notions (Bradley, 2008), or sense of belonging (Bradley, 2013), which may result in the realignment of tenant identities and/or experiences. Recognising the importance of a diversity of voices and identities, Muir and McMahon (2015) argue that philosophies of service-user involvement should value lived experience as well as professional expertise. This has particularly been highlighted as a crucial area of recognition in the wake of the Grenfell Tower fire (London Assembly, 2018).

Organisational culture

Pawson et al (2012, p.60) argue that whilst strong leadership that champions the cause of tenant participation within organisations 'may not in itself be sufficient to engineer a customer responsive organisation, it is almost certainly a necessary condition for success'. Equally important, however, were broader cultures of openness and a 'customer-friendly' ethos. The power of organisational cultures in participation is echoed in other research with tenants and landlords, which highlighted the importance of developing cultures of trust, accountability, transparency and partnership working in order to deliver effective tenant involvement (Bliss et al., 2015, p.16). These issues have been echoed in a recent independent review of tenant engagement for the Regulatory Board for Wales (HQN, 2019, p.2), which notes that the purpose of resident involvement is not primarily to bring about specific practical outcomes, but is to engender a relationship of mutual trust, embedded at every level. Developing trust is a process, which relies on demonstrating that engagement has genuine impact (The Democratic Society, 2019). It may also require organisations to consider the 'cultural gap' between organisations and communities, to question what constitutes valid knowledge, and to ensure that experiential and subjective knowledge is valued (Hastie, 2018). Changing culture requires both top-down and bottom-up processes, driven from senior leadership and through sustained resident engagement, to embed engagement within processes rather than adding it onto existing practices (Manzi et al., 2015). It is through the promotion of these organisational cultures committed to resident involvement that Pawson et al (2012) argue that lasting gains could be achieved.

Type, purpose and focus of tenant participation activities

Introduction

Tenant participation activities can be seen as happening along a spectrum of involvement, from the provision of information to involvement in the governance of social housing providers. Whilst there is no single structure of how involvement might best work (Family Mosaic, 2016), it is worth noting that many of these activities are landlord-initiated, and take place within participation structures created by landlords. It is therefore also important to consider the mobilisation of tenants outside formal structures and processes of participation (Furbey et al., 1996).

There is some evidence of a shift in tenant participation activities, towards the use of technology and customer data analysis in order to tailor and improve services (Family Mosaic, 2015). This links to debates around consumerisation and individualisation in tenant participation, rather than focusing on collective voice and representation (Bradley, 2012, Jensen, 1998). Depending on the type of participation and the place in which it occurs within organisational structures, there are also debates in relation to the operational versus strategic focus of activities; this is discussed in the last section of this chapter.

Type and range of tenant participation activities

Tenant participation has developed in a diffuse way, leading to a wide range of different approaches and techniques (Reid and Hickman, 2002). Classic studies have characterised organisations according to their approach to tenant participation, for example Cairncross et al (1994) classified local authorities as traditional, consumerist or citizenship organisations. However, despite many different approaches and activities, it is not always clear what tenant involvement is seeking to achieve and why it is undertaken (Regulatory Board for Wales, 2019).

Tenant participation activities can be characterised in different ways. Activities can be divided into two strands according to the initiator – for example, tenant-initiated (through tenant and resident associations), or landlord-initiated (through panels, forums and consultations) (Family Mosaic, 2015). Other conceptualisations have presented tenant participation as occurring along a continuum, including giving information and advice, consultations, tenant panels, service-specific groups, mystery shoppers, tenant and resident associations, involvement in management, strategic decision-making, and governance arrangements (Campbell Tickell, 2014, Pawson et al., 2012, National Housing Federation, 2016, Pawson and Smith, 2009). Whatever the type of activities, research has highlighted the importance of genuine and wide-ranging forms of involvement (Manzi et al., 2015).

The provision of information and consultation has been characterised as a more limited form of participation, in comparison to leading decision-making processes, for example through board or committee membership (Hall and Hickman, 2011). Whilst many housing associations continue to have tenant board members, others have shifted emphasis to involving residents at more levels of decision-making, for example through different panels, forums and surveys (National Housing Federation, 2016, Shelter, 2019). There is no requirement for housing associations to have tenant board members in England, unlike in the Netherlands, for example, where residents must be present. However, concerns over conflicts of interest mean that nominees cannot be tenants of the association concerned (Pawson et al., 2012, p.5). In England, some organisations have warned of the potential for professional ‘group think’ when tenants are not represented at Board level (TAROE Trust, 2018).

In more recent years, driven by the changing regulatory environment, social landlords have supported more formal processes of performance analysis and challenge, through scrutiny panels that examine service delivery (CIH Scotland, 2017, Homes and Communities Agency, 2017). In practice, many organisations offer a menu of different forms of participation. Options may include formal and informal involvement, long- and short-term activities, and specific forms of participation to reach under-represented groups (Pawson et al., 2012, p.6). However, critics have argued that such ‘choice’ models can be used ‘to give the illusion of participation’ when they are mechanisms for regulating decision making and a diversion from developing a mutually arising agenda with tenants (Reid and Hickman, 2002, p.914). As such, whilst some approaches have the appearance of promoting a ‘citizenship’ agenda, their operation in practice can still result in limited transfer of power and ‘controlled participation’ (Lee, 2010, Cheung and Yip, 2003).

In its broader form, it can be argued that tenant participation is not about discrete events, consultations, or structures of participation, but is a process arising from a particular culture or mind-set (Department for Social Development, 2016). This can create a disjuncture between forms of participation and knowledge, and support for them at different parts of organisations (Beckford et al., 2003). Indeed, Pawson et al (2012, p.8) argue that:

Lasting gains in resident involvement will be achieved only through the creation of a corporate ethos which is fully committed to this objective, and by securing staff buy-in at every level of the organisation. Managers therefore need to recognise the concept of organisational culture and the ways that this may be shaped in support of legitimate objectives.

However, the longstanding mobilisation of tenants outside formal structures and processes of participation highlights the inadequacy of a sole focus on the sponsorship of tenant participation by the State and organisations (Furbey et al., 1996). Tenants’ Associations are also an important part of the story of tenant participation, and may participate through the ‘inside’ by sending representatives to different forums, or from the ‘outside’ by strategies of negotiation with landlords (Simmons and Birchall, 2007).

Some housing associations have indicated a shift towards using data as a form of tenant participation, in order to respond to the needs and experiences of the broader tenant population (Family Mosaic, 2015). This involves treating customer interactions as a form of involvement and utilising the data to identify trends and issues, and then using these as the basis for issue-based resident involvement and service improvements (Family Mosaic, 2016). In part, this is a response to concerns about the limited number of ‘involved’ tenants and their lack of representativeness, as digital approaches can help to ensure a high volume of engagement (London Assembly, 2018). Whilst there are advocates for new approaches, there are also notes of caution (Regulatory Board for Wales, 2019). For example, new technologies may be changing the way in which some individuals want to get involved with their landlords, but there are inequalities in skills and access to digital tools. Therefore, organisations must be mindful of potential exclusionary impacts for some groups arising from the use of digital approaches (The Democratic Society, 2019, Marsh, 2018). A more critical perspective also highlights the potential for this mode of participation to reinforce the power of housing providers by recruiting recipients of services as ‘data sources’, harvesting their views and experiences for business improvement and replacing collective forms of participation with market research techniques (Bradley, 2013, p.389). This issue is discussed in more depth in the next section.

'Customerisation' and collectivism in tenant participation

Reid and Hickman (2002, p.910) distinguished between approaches to tenant participation as 'individual', where the communication channel is focused on contact with tenants as individuals, and 'collective', where the focus is more on communication with groups of tenants. Similarly, there has been a perceived shift from democratic models of participation to 'market research' models. Bradley (2012, p.1135) found a continued commitment to the principles of direct democracy, collective action, and the ability of tenant groups to generate their own views and policies, in the tradition of social movements. However, this contrasted with organisations support for tenant participation, which was shifting to panels, consultations, and selection processes, favouring 'market research' techniques over collective representation (Bradley, 2012). For example, one housing association argued that resident involvement needed to be timely – earlier in the process – and appropriate, meaning involving residents 'when their expertise meets our specific business needs' (Family Mosaic, 2016, p.5).

This ties into debates around consumerisation, individualisation, and tenant participation as a route to business improvement, rather than supporting collective voice, representation, and activism (Bradley, 2012, Jensen, 1998). For example, a recent government consultation on social housing in England notes that 'better knowledge of how services compare can help people to be more informed consumers and push for service improvements' (MHCLG, 2018). Such debates are not only found in the UK context, but also in Hong Kong which has seen the 'customerisation' of public housing governance (Cheung and Yip, 2003), and in Denmark (Jensen, 1995). With its roots in co-operative history, Danish non-profit housing is seen as the most far-reaching model of participatory democracy, with a high level of decision-making undertaken by residents (Hansen and Langergaard, 2017, Pittini, 2011). Yet, there are tensions between values of self-determination and collectivity, and market logics, manifesting in the dominance of 'I-thinking' (individualistic understandings of home and neighbourhood) against 'we-thinking' (Hansen and Langergaard, 2017, p.1097). In-depth case studies by Pawson et al (2012, p.5) in a number of countries across Europe also noted that all the landlords participating in the research were moving towards a more individualised, consumerist approach, creating time- and commitment-limited mechanisms of involvement. However, there was also recognition of the limitations of such models, and generally such approaches were combined with more structured and collective forms of involvement.

Housing providers and stakeholders have noted a declining number of tenant and resident associations (Family Mosaic, 2015, TAROE Trust, 2018, London Assembly, 2018). It must be acknowledged that some tenants do value being involved with their landlord on their own terms, rather than through collective mechanisms (Flynn, 2019). However, the move towards customerisation is seen as problematic because of the limited consumer power housing association tenants have, as they cannot easily use the threat of moving their 'business' elsewhere to demand a good service (Kruythoff, 2008, Shelter, 2019). Some groups have argued that the move towards co-regulation and the emphasis on scrutiny panels have marginalised collective tenant representation, undermining the voice of tenants and the exercise of collective power (TAROE Trust, 2018). Landlord-established forms of participation and scrutiny has been linked to widespread de-recognition of tenant federations and other tenant bodies, in 'an act of political exclusion' (TAROE Trust, 2018, p.13). Because landlords are able to select who sits on boards or panels, tenants and residents who participate in this way have been seen by some as lacking independence and autonomy, in comparison to tenant and resident associations which elect their members and have a democratic foundation (London Assembly, 2018).

Issues of collective representation also feature in broader debates, outside the structures of participation supported by specific housing providers. Participation activities may be about more than housing issues or landlord-tenant relations; as Somerville and Steele (1995, p.278) argue, action may be constructed around public services more generally, notions of citizenship, neighbourhoods and communities, or even broader social movements. Building on this idea of the scale at which tenant participation occurs, in the wake of the Grenfell Tower fire there have been calls for the establishment of a formally recognised, government funded, national tenants' group (TAROE Trust, 2018, A Voice for Tenants, 2019), as a mechanism to enable tenants to shape the direction of national government policy (Rees, 2018, Shelter, 2019). Previous attempts to develop a National Tenants Voice were short-lived, with the body abandoned after a few months (Shelter, 2019). There have also been calls for the Welsh Government to continue to provide strategic leadership in tenant participation, but to focus on regional and national initiatives, such as consulting on matters of housing policy (Campbell Tickell, 2014, p.14). A recent review in Wales also questions how the voices of tenants can be heard at the national level by the regulator and Regulatory Board for Wales (Regulatory Board for Wales, 2019).

Operational or strategic focus of participation

Different organisational typologies have been developed to classify housing providers according to how they envisage the role of tenant participation. For example, Reid and Hickman (2002) refer to compliance (responding to statutory obligations), improving, or integrating models of participation. The Democratic Society (2019, p.10) argues that 'at a more meaningful level, engagement requires an organisation to give its customers a real opportunity for influence and participation'. This means shaping decisions, rather than just being invited to respond to a set agenda, and moving from consulting to co-creating (The Democratic Society, 2019). However, critics have argued that meaningful engagement has too often been done 'to' tenants, rather than 'with' tenants (TAROE Trust, 2018), and that stronger regulation of the sector is needed, rather the current emphasis on minimising interference (Regulator of Social Housing, 2018, p.7). Current regulatory approaches position tenant participation as a relationship between consumers and service providers over service standards, performance scrutiny and complaints (Bradley, 2013, CIH Scotland, 2017).

In part, the focus of tenant participation depends on the type of activity and the place at which it occurs within an organisation. For example, it may be expected that Board-level participation would fulfil a more strategic role (although this expectation can be subverted). Much research suggests that participation is greatest – in terms of the number involved and the level of engagement – around 'micro-level' issues that directly affect the daily lives of tenants (Hall and Hickman, 2011). Some research has argued that tenants are more interested in things that directly affect their home environment, than in policy and strategy (Reid and Hickman, 2002, Family Mosaic, 2015). It may be that this reflects a failure to communicate the role of strategy and the possible outcomes from policy-development; connecting lived experience to policy change is one way in which to make strategies more relevant to service-users (Muir and McMahon, 2015). However, whilst some tenants may value greater involvement in decision-making, it must also be recognised that the demands of such involvement may be seen as onerous by others (Hall and Hickman, 2011).

In some respects, formal scrutiny arrangements can be seen as bridging the operational-strategic dichotomy, and have been presented as a 'natural progression from more traditional types of tenant participation' (CIH Scotland, 2017, p.5). Scrutiny arrangements are seen as going further than other forms of participation, by formally providing opportunities to analyse, challenge, and improve services (CIH Scotland, 2017). In England, there is a regulatory requirement for tenants of registered providers to have 'a wide range of opportunities to influence and be involved' in service delivery and strategy formulation (Homes and Communities Agency, 2017). However, there are currently calls for housing associations to commit to a number of rights, for example for tenants to be listened to and have their views heard, to be able to collectively influence decisions, and to have the power, information and agency to hold their landlords to account (National Housing Federation, 2019).

Whilst Board membership may be seen as a largely strategic domain, research with tenant board members has highlighted the tensions between operational issues and strategic focus. The National Housing Federation Code of Governance for board excellence (2015, p.2) highlights the requirement that:

All members of the board, executive and non-executive, share the same legal status and have equal responsibility. Each must act only in the interests of the organisation and not on behalf of or representing any constituency or interest group.

As such, tenants who formally become non-executive directors are legally obliged to act in the interests of the organisation, which may at times conflict with their perception of the interests of the tenant body. In addition, those who raise operational issues may be seen as challenging governing arrangement. However, Bradley argues that the boundary between operational and strategic issues is not clear, and that organisational practices differ, therefore the raising of operational issues is not in and of itself an automatic indicator of poor governance (Bradley, 2008, p.885). Indeed, for some tenant board members, there was no perceived tension between their role and raising specific issues on behalf of other tenants (Bradley, 2008). This illustrates the ways in which 'governable subjects can adapt, as well as reject, top-down mentalities of rule' (McKee, 2011, p.13).

Motivations, barriers and drivers of tenant participation

Introduction

This section considers the different motivations for, and barriers to, participation that have been discussed within the research literature. Tenant motivations are diverse and may relate to a desire to be involved in improving the management of homes, or broader norms of collective voice and representation (McKee and Cooper, 2008). However, it has been acknowledged that some individuals and social groups may face barriers to participation, whether those relate to structures for participation (The Democratic Society, 2019), perceptions of lack of influence (Ipsos MORI, 2009), institutional atmospheres (Hastie, 2018), or practical barriers such as transport (McKee, 2009). It has been suggested that some barriers to participation may be bridged through capacity building programmes, (CIH Scotland, 2017), but others have critiqued such training for promoting particular notions of what it is to be a 'good' committee member (McKee and Cooper, 2008).

Housing providers also have defined motivations for promoting tenant participation, for example improving housing management functions (McDermont, 2007). It is also the case that whether or not organisations value tenant participation, it is a regulatory requirement, and therefore social housing providers have to support it to some extent. Reforms of the regulatory framework can therefore be important drivers of change in tenant participation.

Tenant motivations and barriers to participation

Tenant motivations for involvement are diverse, and researchers have cautioned against lumping together all tenants, types of action, and places when considering why people get involved in forms of participation (Bengtsson, 2000). Studying post-transfer involvement in Glasgow, McKee and Cooper (2008) found that local residents framed their motivation to participate as being the 'tenants' voice' and representing tenants' interests. Simmons and Birchall (2007) also highlighted the importance of collectivistic incentives to participation, which were a more powerful motivation for being involved than the pursuit of individual benefits; their research into tenant participation in Tenants' Associations and Tenant Management Organisations found that 80% of participants would still participate even without the individual benefits that they highlighted as important (such as learning, enjoyment, and a sense of achievement). Bengtsson (2000, p.177) similarly noted the importance of 'norms of co-operation' in sustaining collective action on Swedish estates. However, there are questions as to whether the motivation to contribute to collective benefit at a community-level is related to particular cohorts or generations, and subject to change over time (Marsh, 2018). Some research has also noted tension between the needs and preferences of existing tenants, and those who aspire to be tenants, which may result in the promotion of agendas of self-interest (Mullins et al., 2017, p.24).

One of the most common concerns among organisations is that despite a varied approach to tenant participation, only a minority of tenants are involved, and tend not to match the composition of the wider population; therefore, participation may not reflect the views of a majority of tenants (Family Mosaic, 2015). In research with landlords and tenants across different organisation types, difficulties in getting tenants to participate was seen as the biggest barrier to effective tenant involvement by all respondents (Bliss et al., 2015).

Whilst traditional structures for participation may be implicated in the failure to reach beyond certain groups (The Democratic Society, 2019), many tenants have also expressed an interest in being more involved in housing management (Ipsos MORI, 2009). Structures may be less important than, for example, perceptions that involvement will have little influence, which can lead to a level of indifference to getting involved and is linked to broader issues of power and social marginalisation (Ipsos MORI, 2009). For example, the experiences that some individuals have of contact with the State are dominated by being told they are doing something wrong, which can discourage future engagement, especially when the expectation is that engagement is unlikely to result in change (Hastie, 2018).

Barriers to participation are therefore not just about structures and processes, but also about less tangible affective atmospheres of participation. Tenants and local authority housing staff have noted the importance of leadership in driving a tenant-centred culture, whilst lack of leadership was seen as a key barrier to effective resident engagement (Flynn, 2019). Hastie (2018) argues that many people find engagement with public services unfamiliar and uncomfortable, and wider engagement requires attention to creating the right environments for dialogue with different communities and groups.

Nevertheless, there are practical barriers to participation, in addition to perceptual issue. Considering ways of involving all groups in Northern Ireland, Muir and McMahon (2015) identified a number of barriers to involvement, including the way participation was organised, access issues, power imbalances and lack of trust, and lack of attention to practical issues such as travel costs. Similar issues around transport, childcare, and the perception of cliques within participation structures have also been identified in research in Scotland (McKee, 2009). Some tenants have spoken of the stigma attached to involvement, and being perceived by other tenants as 'busybodies' (Ipsos MORI, 2009). Yet, those who do not participate also face being labelled as 'negligent' or 'apathetic' (McKee, 2009).

Whilst non-participation may reflect barriers to involvement, it must also be recognised that discussions of tenant participation are often underpinned by an unspoken assumption that residents should want to be involved with their landlord, when in fact they may have more pressing issues to deal with (Family Mosaic, 2015). Many individuals are managing a number of other responsibilities and may have little capacity or desire to take on additional participatory roles and responsibilities (Breukers et al., 2017). More broadly, in critiquing the notion of responsible participation in welfare, questions have been asked about whether participation is really what people experiencing poverty need or want (Paddison et al., 2008).

Capabilities and capacity building

Much research has focused on issues of capacity building and skills development as a way of facilitating tenant participation, particularly in governance structures. For example, individuals may feel that they do not have the competencies to make financial and budgeting decisions (Hansen and Langergaard, 2017). Theorising the Danish housing system, Jensen (1998, p.134) argued that social housing is built constitutionally around egalitarianism, but does not recognise that 'participation is demanding and does not emerge naturally from a system of formal voice options'. Therefore, widening participation can favour the 'strongest' and exclude those with fewer resources (Kruythoff, 2008). The experience and histories of neighbourhoods are important in understanding participation. Exploring participation between tenant organisations and a housing association in Rotterdam, Kruythoff (2008) found that tenant organisations in old urban renewal areas were able to draw on long histories of civic action, participation, and experience as activists. This contrasted with tenant organisations in newer districts that felt they still had a lot to learn.

Capacity building programmes can be long-term commitments, for example, prior to the conversion of a Toronto public housing project into a co-operative, a community development programme was carried out from 1998 to 2003 to provide education and training opportunities, including literacy programmes, in order to demonstrate residents' capacity to manage the development (Sousa and Quarter, 2004, Sousa and Quarter, 2005). In the UK, training programmes such as 'Stepping Up to Scrutiny' are designed to prepare social landlords and tenants to undertake scrutiny in practice (CIH Scotland, 2017).

These competency-based training programmes have been criticised for de-contextualising learning, moving away from collective experiences, and promoting State-approved notions of 'citizenship' and 'enterprise' at the expense of representations drawing on the lived experience of tenants (Furbey et al., 1996). Such interventions can be viewed as a responsabilising technique. In such analyses, training is seen as a key technique of 'empowerment', instilling local residents with the competencies they need to be involved in governance, whilst also requiring behaviour to conform to existing notions of being a 'good' committee member (McKee and Cooper, 2008).

Organisational motivations for tenant participation

From the housing provider perspective, there are varied motivations for promoting tenant participation. Being accountable to tenants may be seen as part of the organisational 'social mission', as good business practice, or as a way of meeting regulatory requirements (Campbell Tickell, 2014). Pawson et al (2012) highlight the perception among landlords that resident involvement on a consumer basis was consistent with the consumer-focused ethos of their own business model. For some English providers, effective resident involvement could also enhance attractiveness to potential merger partner landlords (Pawson et al., 2012).

McDermont (2007) argues that most versions of tenant participation start from the perspective and needs of the landlord, for example, there may be practical benefits in making estates more lettable or improving housing management operations. Indeed, one of the motivations for supporting participation is to drive organisational improvement in the belief that involvement will lead to improvements in the quality and standard of services for tenants (CIH Scotland, 2017). Similarly in Denmark, with a history rooted in a civil society logic of participation, legislative reforms to widen the scope of democratic decision making, by letting tenants approve budgets, stemmed from housing associations' hope that they would become more competitive as a housing form if residents could make their own decisions about living areas (Hansen and Langergaard, 2017). In this sense participation can be seen as fulfilling a pragmatic function, rather than necessarily being linked to a broader agendas of tenants' rights. As Reid and Hickman (2002) note, tenant participation in modernisation and improvement programmes has become an embedded part of the process, with a strong belief that it increases tenant satisfaction and reduces management issues later.

Whilst resident involvement in corporate decision-making may be the norm for some providers, for other social landlords the ethic of resident involvement flows – at least partly – from the need to legitimise operation at a growing scale and justify retention of the taxation or funding benefits attached to not-for-profit provider status (Pawson et al., 2012, p.8). However, there is some evidence that the 1% annual rent reduction for housing associations in England, running from 2016 to 2020, has resulted in reduced resources for tenant participation, including cuts to participation-focussed staffing (Rees, 2018, Hickman et al., 2018). TAROE Trust (2018) goes further, arguing that the 1% rent reduction resulted in the vast majority of landlords making significant cuts to tenant empowerment budgets. This suggests some vulnerability in support for tenant participation, in which some elements are seen as discretionary, rather than essential, services.

Regulatory and policy drivers of tenant participation

Whether or not organisations value tenant participation, it is a regulatory requirement in England. Somerville (1998, p.248) argues that legislation is a uniquely strong institutional support for those seeking greater control over their lives, and that ‘without legislation the political will for empowerment tends to be weak or non-existent’. Broad national policies – in different country contexts – are therefore strong factors influencing the models of participation that are seen as desirable (Kruythoff, 2008). In Scotland, for example, whole-stock transfers to ‘community ownership’ were underpinned by a desire to secure investment to modernise housing, at the same time as facilitating tenant empowerment (McKee, 2011).

Policy is also an important driver of change in approaches to tenant participation. Writing in the 1990s, Cairncross et al (1994, p.190) argued that the significance of legislation enabling transfer of stock, increased the willingness of most councils to listen to tenants through the 1980s because of the ‘threat of exit’. In addition to economic rationalities of the benefits of choice, efficiency and consumer satisfaction, the realignment of housing governance through stock transfer and arms-length management was envisaged as increasing civic engagement through the role of tenants pre- and post-transfer (Flint, 2003, p.620). Even without stock transfer, changing government policy has been one of the key factors in the extension and broadening out of tenant participation in the local authority housing sector, resulting in the multiplication of forms of engagement between landlords and tenants (Hickman, 2006). However, while the social, political and legal context within which tenant participation operates are an important influence, those factors themselves do not determine whether people participate (Simmons and Birchall, 2007).

Even in the absence of significant landlord motivation for tenant participation, some form of participation is required to meet the regulatory framework, and some organisations have seen participation largely as a matter of meeting their statutory obligations (Reid and Hickman, 2002). Since 2007, but particularly since 2010, there has been ‘a dramatic shift’ in England away from prescriptive requirements around tenant participation, and from independent scrutiny of implementation (Pawson et al., 2012, p.4). In England, registered providers must ensure tenants have a wide range of opportunities to influence and be involved in (among other things) housing policies and strategic priorities, service standards, and scrutinising performance (Homes and Communities Agency, 2017). But as a tenant involvement and empowerment is a consumer standard, there is a high threshold for regulatory intervention. The reduced regulatory focus in relation to tenant involvement has been cited as a barrier to participation (Bliss et al., 2015).

As in England, the Welsh Government’s Regulatory Framework is based on expectations of robust housing association self-evaluation and annual regulatory judgements (Smith, 2018). Housing associations are required to demonstrate how tenants are effectively involved in strategic decision making and shaping services (Welsh Government, 2017). Requirements for local authorities are less prescriptive, with no regulatory or inspection regime to promote or enforce participation (Campbell Tickell, 2014). In Scotland, the tone of regulation is different. The Housing (Scotland) Act 2010 led to the introduction of a new regulatory regime, establishing the Scottish Housing Regulator, which has a statutory duty to safeguard and promote the interests of tenants and other service users (Serin et al., 2018). The regulatory regime includes giving tenants an enhanced role in scrutinising performance, and data is made available on key indicators to facilitate this (CIH Scotland, 2017).

As noted in the introduction, there are a number of on-going reviews and consultations in relation to social housing, which stem from the Grenfell Tower fire tragedy (Rees, 2018, National Housing Federation, 2019, TAROE Trust, 2018, London Assembly, 2018, MHCLG, 2018, Shelter, 2019). As part of these reflections, there have been calls for tenants and residents to have greater power, information and agency to hold their landlord to account (National Housing Federation, 2019, p.5).

The benefits of tenant participation

Introduction

As noted in the previous section, the changing regulatory environment has been an important driver of approaches to tenant participation, but the drive for increased tenant involvement in mechanisms of scrutiny have been linked to continuous improvement and value for money agendas (CIH Scotland, 2017). For example, in research drawing on six years of data from a large housing association, a ‘strong and intensifying correlation’ between involving residents and improved performance was identified (Manzi et al., 2015). This links to the organisational motivations for promoting tenant participation identified earlier, since involvement may align with other business objectives (Campbell Tickell, 2014). However, Tunstall and Pleace (2018, p.74) note that there is ‘little recent evidence on the prevalence and effectiveness of tenant participation structures and methods’.

Value for money and service delivery

Participation in the management of social housing has been based in part on the belief that the involvement of tenants will trigger business improvements and efficiencies in welfare services, in a context in which competition and consumer choice are limited (Bradley, 2013, p.388). In developing service and business objectives around the needs and expectations of tenants, there is also potential for lenders and investors to be reassured that resources are being directed at priorities that matter the most (Department for Social Development, 2016).

However, some research has found that tenants and landlords were less likely to identify cost savings as a benefit of tenant participation, although most did believe that participation resulted in service and satisfaction improvements (Bliss et al., 2015). Organisations such as Tenant Management Organisations, co-ops, and Arms-Length Management Organisations – with tenants more involved in governance – were more likely to rank cost-savings from tenant participation higher, compared to other organisational forms (Bliss et al., 2015). However, one of the key challenges in identifying cost savings lies in identifying the extent to which tenant input led to the difference, or whether the difference would have come about anyway (Bliss and Lambert, 2016).

Improvements in services quality have been highlighted as one of the three most important benefits deriving from tenant involvement; tenant satisfaction and feelings of ownership through influencing change were the other key benefits (Bliss et al., 2015). Research with social housing organisations in England noted that tenant participation was perceived by organisations as most effective when it was linked to a specific project, such as modernisation and improvement works (Reid and Hickman, 2002). Tenant panels have also been noted as playing a role in improving services, by delivering tenant influence over the management of homes and neighbourhoods (Bliss and Lambert, 2012).

Scrutiny of services and other types of service-review by tenants were seen as particularly significant in enabling tenants to have a demonstrable impact on services, for example by generating efficiencies or leading to a stronger tenant-orientation in delivery (Bliss et al., 2015). Through scrutiny, it has been argued that tenants and other customers can make a substantial and central contribution to the assessment of their landlord’s performance (CIH Scotland, 2017, p.4). As well as ensuring value for money, tenant scrutiny has potential to deliver better outcomes for tenants and landlords across a wide range of activities (CIH Scotland, 2017). It can also impact across different levels of organisations, from ensuring effective governance to delivering specific services, or supporting communities to have a voice in neighbourhood management (CIH Scotland, 2017, p.5). Proposed regulatory changes in England suggest movement towards the publication of key performance indicators, to enable tenants to compare services and have access to information that will enable them to ‘push for service improvements’ (MHCLG, 2018, p.35). However, achieving impact requires robust mechanisms to ensure that resident oversight is meaningful and effective (Manzi et al., 2015), which likely involves transfers of power and the commitment of resources.

Tenant skills' development

There are also perceived benefits for the specific tenants that are involved in participation activities, for example the development of social capital, gaining skills and knowledge, confidence-building, and a sense of pride in their achievements – individually and as groups (Bliss and Lambert, 2012, Bliss et al., 2015). There is potential for participation to therefore 'have a huge transformatory effect on the individuals who get involved' (Bliss and Lambert, 2016, p.14). Some research has highlighted that the skills developed through tenant participation are transferable to other areas of life, and therefore can have broader impacts (Campbell Tickell, 2014, The Democratic Society, 2019). Tenant groups also have a role in capacity building more widely in the communities in which they operate; this may include advocacy for vulnerable tenants whose voices may otherwise go unheard, as well as wider social activities (Beckford et al., 2003).

Areas for future research

Contemporary approaches to tenant participation

The academic literature is dominated by research published between the mid-1990s and late 2000s, with less published on this topic in the last five years (of four articles, three were in international context and one a reflection post-Grenfell Tower). There is less academic research into contemporary approaches to tenant participation, tenant experiences of participation, and perceptions of the effectiveness of participation. For example, in a recent review of social housing, Tunstall and Pleace (2018, p.74) note that there is 'little recent evidence on the prevalence and effectiveness of tenant participation structures and methods', whilst in the Scottish context Serin et al (2018, p.18) argue that 'independent reports, or indeed any reports, on tenant participation and accountability in the modern era are lacking'.

Given differences in the development and management of social housing across the UK, particularly Scotland and Northern Ireland, and the devolution of regulatory regimes, there is also value in drawing comparisons between the constituent nations of the UK. Whilst some research has looked across the UK (for example, Pawson and Smith, 2009), most has focused on England. There is also a greater volume of research on housing association practices, rather than local authority or area-based tenant participation, or comparative approaches. A comparative approach may highlight differences between landlords, for example in the promotion of wider 'citizenship'-type approaches.

Technological approaches to participation

Linked to this, whilst there is some evidence that some organisations are moving towards digital approaches to tenant participation, including the use of apps and social media (Family Mosaic, 2015), there is little robust or sector-wide research into technologies of participation (Marsh, 2018). Critical interrogation of differential access to and use of such technologies (The Democratic Society, 2019), as well as the potential implications for the decline of collective forms of participation (Bradley, 2013), will be required. Furthermore, as Stirling (2019) argues, whilst the use of technology is frequently referred to as innovative, this is not always the case, and there is potential for research to challenge this assumption.

Drivers of change

The Grenfell Tower fire has prompted a large number of reviews in the social housing sector, including the regulatory environment (MHCLG, 2018, National Housing Federation, 2019), and resident representation and voice at different levels of policy and government (Rees, 2018, Shelter, 2019, TAROE Trust, 2018). This may be a significant driver of change in future approaches to participation, although the practical outcomes are not yet known.

The impact of the Rent Reduction in England – and of the reinstatement of rent increases in 2020 – may also be considered in future research. For example, if the Rent Reduction was a driver of change in organisational support for tenant participation activities in England (TAROE Trust, 2018), it remains to be seen whether rent increases are associated with an expansion of resources for participation. In devolved nations – in which rents have continued to increase – the involvement of tenants in rent setting and approaches to understanding affordability, are likely to be important future areas.

Tenant participation in informal and claimed spaces

Whilst there has been a substantial amount of research into the functioning of housing association boards, and tenant participation in these formal governance structures, there has been less focus on participation in 'claimed' spaces, which are newly created areas of influence that exist outside other structures (Muir and McMahon, 2015, p.20). Understanding these informal and claimed spaces of influence would add another dimension to current research into participation.

Tenant experiences of participation

Cutting across all of these areas, it is important to understand the range of tenant experiences of participation processes. For example, what are the experiences of tenants in relation to the different mechanisms for participation, including digital platforms? It would also be useful to consider whether experiences differ by landlord type, for example between housing associations and local authorities, large and small providers, or rural and urban providers. Understandings of good practice should also seek to draw out what this looks like for tenants, not just landlords.

Conclusion

This evidence review has considered research into tenant participation in the UK social housing sectors. Whilst there are strong traditions of participation in the management and governance of social housing, there are also important historical differences between the constituent nations of the UK, and there may also be future divergence. This highlights the need for an up-to-date picture of participation, greater understanding of contemporary drivers for change, as well as future directions for regulation.

Underpinning understandings of participation are a number of theoretical concepts relating to the nature of power, control, responsibility, and individualism / collectivism. These are likely to continue to be central to future research, helping to draw out the multiple ways in which participation is conceptualised, supported, enacted, and experienced within different organisations. Whilst tenant participation may have become normalised, the nuances of how this is understood between and within different organisations is likely to result in a much more variegated picture.

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Appendix

Table 1: Key search terms

Sample	
Social landlords	Local authority Stock transfers ALMOs Housing associations Social housing / landlords
Phenomenon of Interest	
Participation	Participation Involvement Engagement Governance Scrutiny
Tenants	Tenant* Resident*

Table 2: Search results

First stage				Second stage
Initial search	Combined and duplicates removed	Following title screening	Following abstract screening	Hand-searching journals and grey literature
Web of Science 141	171	45	35	35
Scopus 204				
Total from first stage				
Total from second stage				
Final sample for prioritisation				70