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HOUSING EVIDENCE

# Understanding social housing landlords' approaches to tenant participation

Scoping study

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# Executive Summary

Tenant participation, which in broad terms may be understood as how tenants “*can influence a social landlord’s activity*” (Pawson et al., 2012 p.3), has been a long-standing feature of the UK housing system. In the late 1990s/ early 2000s, it was an important policy priority for Government, but in recent years it has slipped down the policy agenda. The Grenfell fire tragedy, which highlighted in the eyes of many commentators the lack of power and influence tenants have, has changed this, with tenant participation now firmly back as a feature of the policy landscape.

This report presents the key findings of an **exploratory, scoping study** on the subject, which focused on exploring and understanding landlords’ approaches to tenant participation. The report is an output from the UK Collaborative Centre for Housing Evidence (CaCHE), which was launched in 2017. The centre, which is funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, Arts and Humanities Research Council and Joseph Rowntree Foundation, is a multidisciplinary partnership between academia, housing policy and practice. Over the course of the five-year programme, CaCHE researchers will produce evidence and new research which will contribute to tackling the UK’s housing problems at a national, devolved, regional, and local level. The study is one of five on resident voice and involvement in housing that is being undertaken by CaCHE’s governance team.

The research presented here builds on a review of existing research on social housing landlords’ approaches to tenant participation published earlier this year (Preece, 2019), which noted that there has been relatively little recent research on the subject. This research is based on:

- 10 in-depth interviews with representatives of social housing landlords in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. A range of landlord types were included within our sample which contained a mix of small, medium and large providers, operating in different housing market contexts.
- 11 in-depth interviews with representatives of ‘stakeholder’ organisations operating in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. These included professional bodies, tenants’ organisations and tenant participation bodies.
- A focus group comprising 17 representatives from stakeholder organisations, including tenants’ organisations, and social housing landlords.

While, reflecting the aims of the research, most participants were officers of social housing landlords and stakeholder organisations, the study captured the views of eight tenant representatives.

## The key findings of the study are:

### Context for tenant participation

The terms commonly used to describe the ways in which tenants are involved in decision-making, performance management, scrutiny, governance and service improvement issues differ. However, whilst there was acknowledgement that language matters, there was no agreement around the ‘correct’ terminology to use, and some participants argued that the focus should remain on what was achieved rather than the label used to describe it.

Most participants viewed tenant participation as crucial, but the extent to which it was perceived as being prioritised by organisations varied – particularly between England and Scotland. There was a view that in England tenant participation had become less of an organisational priority in recent years. By contrast, in Scotland and Wales the general view of participants was that it had become more of a priority, particularly linked to devolved government agendas and the focus of regulatory guidance.

## The purpose and benefits of tenant participation

The benefits and purpose of tenant participation were invariably seen as being 'one in the same thing'. It was reported that its benefits are wide ranging. They can be categorised into three broad groups: commercial benefits relating to the housing service; benefits to individual tenants; and, social benefits to local communities. All respondents believed that involving tenants in the housing service resulted in commercial benefits to landlords and it was the most commonly cited and most important reason given for why they undertook tenant participation. This rationale is described as being '*consumerist*' in perhaps the most helpful framework to date for understanding approaches to tenant participation: Cairncross et al's (1994) *consumerist*, *citizenship* and *traditional* framework. In the consumerist model, tenant participation is seen as a mechanism for providing better services for tenants as consumers (Hickman, 2006). It was reported that involving tenants brought a number of commercial benefits to landlords including: an improved housing service; higher tenant satisfaction scores; better decision-making and better outcomes; resources being allocated in a more effective way, ensuring that 'over-serving' was less likely to occur (i.e. allocating too much resource to an area of the housing service); and, finally, cost efficiencies as a result of better decision-making and the prevention of over-serving.

A number of individual benefits accrued from involving tenants in the housing service, it was reported. First, it potentially provided them with 'voice', agency and influence. Ensuring that this happened was one of the main purposes of tenant participation for many landlords. This rationale is consistent with the *citizenship* approach in Cairncross et al's model, which characterises tenant participation as being concerned with empowering tenants and giving them genuine voice in the housing service. For landlords who (in part) saw the purpose of tenant participation as being about *citizenship*, the process of conducting tenant participation had value in itself, with it not solely being concerned with outcomes. It was reported that it was particularly important to provide social renters with an opportunity to exert control and choice because they could not easily move to another provider. Some landlords understood tenant participation to be both consumerist and citizenship in terms of its purpose. With many also committed to retaining control over the participation process, which is one of the defining features of the *traditional* type in Cairncross et al's framework, competing tenant participation rationales could often co-exist alongside each other.

Tenant participation brought other benefits to the individual: it could result in them becoming more confident and being upskilled, making them better placed to find employment. It was reported that social benefits accrued from tenant participation: it encouraged social interaction within neighbourhoods, helping to reduce the isolation of vulnerable households; it helped to foster social cohesion within communities; and, it could encourage interaction between generations, thereby helping to build trust between them.

## Understanding and conceptualising approaches to tenant participation

The approaches taken by landlords to tenant participation varied. Notwithstanding this, they can be framed in a number of ways. For example, a distinction can be made between collective and individual forms of engagement, with the latter reportedly becoming increasingly prevalent. Another distinction can be made between landlord initiated structures, such as forums and scrutiny panels, and those initiated by tenants, such as tenant and resident associations (TRAs). A dichotomy also exists between what one respondent described as "*business*" related participation, which was led by landlords, and "*fun*" (ScotHA01) related engagement, which was initiated and led by TRAs. Approaches to tenant participation can be framed in other ways. Some respondents distinguished between informal participation and formal engagement, through structures such as tenants' and residents' associations and landlord initiated mechanisms to review and improve the housing service. It was also possible to differentiate between what some landlords described as an '*embedded*' approach, where engagement was the responsibility of all staff, and a '*functional*' approach, which saw it being primarily the responsibility of a discrete and dedicated team. Most of the landlords that participated in the study adopted the latter approach.

A contrast can also be made between long-standing tenant participation structures, such as area-based tenant and resident associations, and 'new' mechanisms for engagement, such as digital engagement and scrutiny panels. While they continued to play an important role, there was a belief that the importance of TRAs and tenants' federations had declined in the last decade. One of the key reasons for this has been the employment by landlords of other tenant participation mechanisms, both collective ones, such as scrutiny panels and tenant sounding boards, and individual ones, such as surveys, mystery shopping exercises and citizens' panels. One 'new' engagement mechanism that has received attention in recent times is digital engagement. The research found that many landlords are engaging with their tenants 'digitally'. However, there was a belief that for most small and medium sized landlords, digital engagement was not a central element of their approach to tenant participation, although that was not the case for some large landlords who reportedly had invested "*quite heavily*" (housing officer, focus group) in digital mechanisms.

The Cairncross et al. framework provides a valuable framework for understanding landlords' approaches to tenant participation. In line with the findings of Hickman (2006), landlords could not be neatly classified into one of the three types, with many simultaneously employing approaches that were consistent with all three. Most of the tenant participation structures put in place by landlords who took part in the study were consumerist i.e. concerned with the improving the housing service. Consumerist oriented structures included tenant panels, surveys, mystery shopping exercises, and scrutiny panels. Scrutiny panels were a key element of many landlords' approaches.

Landlords employed a range of approaches that were concerned with empowering their tenants, consistent with the citizenship approach, including participatory budgeting. And one of the organisations that took part in the study is a tenant and employee mutual housing association. Moreover, across the sector as a whole there are many other examples of citizenship approaches, such as community-based (and sometimes community-controlled) housing associations, which are prevalent in Scotland and a key feature of the Scottish housing system. However, it was reported that - when viewed nationally - tenants' powers in relation to 'mainstream' tenant participation were relatively limited in England. Wales-based respondents felt that to, a lesser extent, the same could be said of the situation in Wales. However, there was also belief that practice was evolving (in a positive way) across the nation as a result of its regulatory framework and the work of its devolved government (and partner agencies).

Many landlords, and local authorities, in particular, were reluctant to cede power to tenants, which is the defining characteristic of the traditional approach. They also sought to control tenant participation, with it being a top-down process, which is another hallmark of the traditional approach. Many landlords distinguished between 'influence' and 'power' with many reporting that their focus was on providing their tenants with influence over the decision-making process and not on 'empowering' them. It was reported that there are some constraints on landlords, and local authorities, in particular, which make it difficult for them to empower their tenants.

### **Drivers of changing approaches to tenant participation**

The broad political context, beyond specific policy frameworks, plays an important role in structuring organisational approaches to tenant participation. There was recognition of the power of national governments in setting the tone for participation. In particular, contrasts were made between the political context in Scotland and England. Specific policies were also identified as driving change in participation, particularly the Rent Reduction, welfare reform agenda, and the Social Housing Green Paper in England.

The regulatory context was identified by participants as an important driver of approaches to tenant participation, but with different outcomes in different national contexts. In England, there was a general view that the regulatory focus on economic matters and the high threshold for intervention on the grounds of consumer issues resulted in less focus on the voices and experiences of tenants. In Wales and Scotland, participants perceived a greater emphasis from regulators on tenant involvement. Whilst some participants noted the role of strong regulatory requirements in driving their approach to tenant participation, one high-performing organisation in Scotland argued that this was not



the key driver, and they would take the same approach even if the regulatory framework disappeared. Nevertheless, the tone of regulation in terms of the prioritisation of tenant views, and the ability of tenants to go direct to the regulator with concerns, was a notable difference between Scotland and England.

On an organisational level, organisational culture was seen as a key driver of participation. This was about more than regulation: it related to personal, ethical and moral beliefs about the importance and validity of tenant participation. The role of senior leaders in setting the tone was highlighted by a number of participants. This highlights the importance of looking beyond the structures that may exist for participation, because whilst there may be long-standing mechanisms for participation, this does not guarantee efficacy or power. Finally, a number of organisations noted the ways in which changes in the demographic profile of tenants was driving them to rethink approaches to participation, for example, to respond to the changing use of digital technologies among younger tenants.

### **Challenges faced by landlords**

A number of challenges were discussed by participants, largely falling into four areas. The first was to embed a focus on participation within organisations, to ensure that the responsibility for involving tenants in decision-making was not seen as restricted to a specific person or team (even where such teams were present in organisations). Some participants noted that this meant challenging the perceptions of other staff members, recruiting individuals who valued participatory cultures, or reducing patch sizes for frontline officers.

Growing participation, and in doing so, ensuring that the engaged group of tenants were more representative of the broader tenant base was another key challenge highlighted by housing providers. This was seen as a long-term issue, but there was recognition of the need to adopt different mechanisms for participation, that not all tenants wanted to be 'involved' with their landlord, and that there were other ways for tenants to exercise influence than through landlord-initiated or controlled forms of participation. Related to widening involvement, landlords expressed a desire to remove barriers to engagement, for example by providing skills training. Again, there was recognition 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, the challenge of evaluating the impact of tenant participation activities was noted by many respondents, who highlighted how difficult it was to measure outcomes, particularly around value for money, and 'what worked, when, where, and for whom'.

## **Conclusion**

### **Key learning to emerge from the research for social housing landlords**

Reflecting the exploratory nature of this study, it does not seek to provide 'good practice' suggestions as they must be underpinned by in-depth and rigorous case study work. Instead, attention focuses on highlighting some key principles for effective tenant participation:

- Tenants should be involved in determining the approach to tenant participation in their areas so that it matches their needs. One way that this can be done is through [revisiting the idea of] a *'tenant participation compact'*, an agreement drawn-up by landlords *and* tenants working together, which outlines the scope, remit and form of tenant participation.
- The approach taken to tenant participation by landlords, ideally developed in partnership with tenants, should comprise a range of participation mechanisms, so that tenants can choose how they are involved. This will make it more likely that they will be able to identify a mechanism that is 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 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. However, synthesising diverse

views gathered through different channels into an understanding of the profile of tenants' views and aspirations is not straightforward. Landlords need to think carefully about their processes for managing, and responding to, dissenting views and how they manage conflict in the participation process.

- There was a consensus that formal tenant participation structures will continue to play an important role going forward. TRAs, in particular, will be important, fulfilling key community and social functions and providing a more 'bottom-up' and independent perspective on key housing issues. However, there was also a belief that if more tenants are to be engaged, with different voices being heard, then more resource needs to be dedicated to developing informal engagement mechanisms, which allow tenants to engage more flexibly and in ways more suited to their lifestyles.
- *If* tenants want to participate, then it is important that they are able to influence the decision-making process in meaningful ways, rather than their involvement being tokenistic.
- It is vital that tenants can see the impact of their involvement because, if they can, they will be more likely to engage in the future.
- As tenants should be actively involved in decision-making processes, then there should be no need to demonstrate the value of tenant participation. However, notwithstanding the difficulties associated with measuring its impact, it is important that landlords evaluate what they do. They should do so for two reasons. First, in a context where welfare reforms (and Universal Credit, in particular) are having an adverse effect on their finances, demonstrating impact will help them to defend tenant participation budgets. Second, evaluating their activities will allow landlords to develop a better understanding of the impact of different engagement mechanisms.
- Creating a tenant participation '*function*' within organisations, through the employment of tenant involvement officers and teams, can be an effective way of delivering tenant participation, and it is the most common way of doing so across the UK. However, this 'functional' approach is not without its weaknesses, the most important being that it can be a barrier to tenant participation becoming 'embedded' as a way of working across the organisation as a whole, with a culture of valuing participation being confined to one part of the organisation, rather than being infused throughout the organisation as a whole. If tenants are to be given meaningful voice, then it is important that tenant participation is mainstreamed, although not at the expense of tenant participation officers and teams.

### Further research

This study is one of five being undertaken by the CaCHE governance team on 'resident voice'. A future project will be concerned with tenant participation and, specifically, how it is theorised. And there are plans for the team to survey UK social housing landlords' about their approaches to tenant participation as part of a broader survey of their practices. Notwithstanding this programme of work, reflecting the lack of research into tenant participation in recent years, there are significant gaps in knowledge on the subject. Specifically, research is needed on:

**i) Exploring the views and experiences of tenants (and residents) in relation to tenant participation. This work should unpack a range of issues including:**

- What are tenants' expectations of tenant participation? And what do they want from it? What do they see as its purpose?
- What are their experiences of tenant participation?
- To what extent do tenants feel that they can influence the decision-making process? And to what extent are they empowered? What 'responsibilities' and powers do they want?

- What are their views on different tenant participation mechanisms, including long-standing ones, like TRAs, and newer ones, like digital platforms?
- What are the barriers and challenges that they face in relation to tenant participation?

In answering these questions, it is important to unpack how tenants' views and experiences differ (or not) in relation to a range of contextual factors including:

- Their demographic characteristics and circumstances.
- Their participation history. When and how have they engaged? How frequently have they done so? Are they still engaged? And, if not, why did their involvement end? It would also be important to explore the views of 'non-joiners': is their lack of involvement the result of barriers or a lack of desire to participate?
- The characteristics of their landlord.
- Their location, nationally, regionally and sub-regionally.

It is also important that research in this area captures tenants' experiences in relation to the

full spectrum of participation 'models', incorporating both 'mainstream' participation and those structures which are concerned with empowering tenants, such as housing mutuals and tenant management organisations.

## **ii) Understanding, mapping and conceptualising approaches to tenant participation in the four nations that make up the UK**

Previous research has highlighted differences in the approaches to tenant participation across the nations of the UK. This study is relatively small scale and not comparative by design, but it has also found this to be the case. Research is therefore needed into exploring and mapping the approaches taken by landlords across the UK territories. This should involve national surveys of landlords and in-depth case studies. It is imperative that the views of tenants are captured as part of this work.

## **iii) Evaluating the impact of tenant participation activities**

There has been relatively little research into evaluating the impact of tenant participation and identifying its costs and benefits, although there have been some excellent contributions in the field in recent times (see for example, Manzi et al., 2015). This is a task fraught with challenges - including how to evaluate (and potentially monetise) some of the more abstract and diffuse social benefits of participation, like enhanced confidence and wellbeing - but it is, nonetheless, important that work is undertaken in this area. As part of this research, attention should focus on highlighting the costs and benefits of differing engagement mechanisms, including 'old' and 'new', formal and informal, and collective and individual.

# 1. Introduction

## 1.1. Introduction

'Tenant participation', which in broad terms may be understood as how tenants "*can influence a social landlord's activity*" (Pawson et al., 2012 p.3), has been a long-standing feature of the UK housing system. In the late 1990s/ early 2000s, it was an important policy priority for Government, but in recent years it has slipped down the policy agenda. The Grenfell fire tragedy, which highlighted in the eyes of many commentators the lack of power and influence tenants have, has changed this, with tenant participation now firmly back as a feature of the policy landscape.

There is a large literature on tenant participation. However, relatively little has been written on the subject in recent years (Preece, 2019), particularly in relation to the approaches landlords take to involving their tenants. This report presents the key findings of an **exploratory, scoping study** on this issue, which involved a review of the existing evidence base and interviews with social housing landlords and stakeholders.

The report is an output from the UK Collaborative Centre for Housing Evidence (CaCHE), which was launched in 2017. The centre, which is funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, Arts and Humanities Research Council and Joseph Rowntree Foundation, is a multidisciplinary partnership between academia, housing policy and practice. Over the course of the five-year programme, CaCHE researchers will produce evidence and new research which will contribute to tackling the UK's housing problems at a national, devolved, regional, and local level. This study is one of five on resident voice and involvement in housing that is being undertaken by CaCHE's governance team.

This chapter contextualises the research. Drawing on the previously published evidence review (Preece, 2019), it begins by defining tenant participation and then moves on to provide an account of its development across the UK. The regulatory context for tenant involvement is then considered. The final sections of the chapter are concerned with highlighting the approach taken to the research and the structure of the report.

## 1.2. Defining tenant participation

Tenant participation is a contested concept which captures a variety of forms and processes (McKee and Cooper, 2008, p.133). In this report it is understood to mean: "*Tenants' involvement with decision making, policy changes, performance improvement, and community projects*" (Campbell Tickell, 2014, p.10). The terms 'involvement', 'engagement', 'empowerment' and 'participation' are often used interchangeably (Stirling, 2019), so in this report 'tenant participation' is used as a catch-all term to capture all of these approaches.

Tenant participation is commonly framed as tenants becoming involved in decisions about services or being empowered in order to take greater control over services (Department for Social Development, 2016). 'Empowerment' is the term used by the UK government to describe how landlords should involve tenants. However, it has been argued that the term is perhaps more appropriately used in relation to co-operative or tenant-managed organisations than in relation to 'mainstream' tenant participation within the housing service of social housing landlords (Campbell Tickell, 2014).

## 1.3. The development of tenant participation

Tenant participation was not a feature of the early years of council housing (Hague, 1990). It emerged as an activity sponsored by government in the 1970s, developing as a response to perceptions of unresponsive and insensitive service delivery (Paddison et al., 2008). Another contributory factor was 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).

By the 1980s, tenant participation had become *“a central part of social housing rhetoric”* (McDermont, 2007, p.78). As part of a broader civic and community development project, in the 1990s the New Labour governments of Tony Blair introduced a number of initiatives to promote tenant participation, including the linking of local authorities’ capital funding allocations to their tenant participation ‘performance’ (via the ‘Housing Investment Programme’ process) and ‘Tenant Participation Compacts’. These were co-produced agreements between local authorities and tenants which stipulated how tenants would be involved in the housing service.

Tenant participation has not been a priority of the Conservative-led governments that have been in power since 2010, and they have paid relatively little attention to it. However, the Grenfell Fire disaster in June 2017 has seen tenant participation re-emerge as a key policy issue for Government and the broader housing policy and practice community. The disaster prompted a large number of reviews into social housing, including the regulatory environment and the extent to which resident voices are heard and valued.

While for many housing providers, tenant participation is now considered the norm (Family Mosaic, 2015) and *“a new orthodoxy within the housing sector”* (Manzi et al., 2015, p.7), 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 Grenfell Tower tragedy must be viewed 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) is consulting on revising its Code of Governance so that it includes requirements for Boards to be accountable to tenants and residents. It is also writing a new charter (‘Together with Tenants’) for tenant engagement. Similarly, TAROE Trust (2018) have called for tenant empowerment and participation to be a regulated, enforceable ‘right’ based on robust, prescriptive standards. Others have argued that the threshold for the regulator to intervene in ‘consumer’ matters in England is too high, placing too high a burden of proof on residents’ groups. And it has been argued that this ‘serious detriment’ test for intervention should be removed (Shelter, 2019).

The government has outlined its expectation that providers in England will *“continue to work closely with residents in developing new opportunities to have their voice heard in decisions that affect them”* in the Green Paper, *‘A New Deal for Social Housing’* (MHCLG, 2018, p.36). It has been proposed that residents should be provided with data through key performance indicators, which would be monitored as part of the regulatory regime (MHCLG, 2018). Doing so would move English regulation closer to the Scottish model, which allows tenants to compare services (Serin et al., 2018). 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).

Before turning our attention to how it is regulated, it is important to note that the tenant participation histories of the four nations that comprise the UK are very different, as are their tenant involvement cultures. For example, in Scotland there is a long tradition of tenant participation in social housing (Serin et al., 2018). The prevalence of older community-based housing associations, and those formed from stock transfers under the Community Ownership programme, means that Scottish housing associations are generally smaller and more likely to be community-controlled, in contrast with England housing associations (Clapham and Kintrea, 2000).

In Glasgow from the mid-1970s the development of tenant participation through ‘community-based’ housing associations was positioned as a vehicle for tenants to access resources and to drive the neighbourhood renewal process (Paddison et al., 2008). Within a decade this tenant-dominated model came to characterise the housing association sector in Scotland, setting it apart from the sectors in other parts of the UK (Paddison et al., 2008). Many Scottish housing associations are still membership-based organisations, open to local residents (Serin et al., 2018).

## 1.4. Regulatory context

The current regulatory regime in England requires registered providers to 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). Social housing landlords must support tenants to scrutinise and shape service delivery and hold councillors and boards to account (Regulator of Social Housing, 2018). However, these regulations lack ‘bite’ because the ‘tenant involvement and empowerment’ regulatory standard is a consumer, rather than economic, one: this means that a high threshold must be breached before the regulator would intervene (Manzi et al., 2015).

The tone of regulation is very different in Scotland. The Housing (Scotland) Act 2010 resulted in the introduction of a new regulatory regime, establishing the Scottish Housing Regulator. This has a statutory duty to safeguard and promote the interests of tenants and other service users (Serin et al., 2018). As part of the regulatory regime, tenants have an enhanced role in scrutinising performance, with data being made available on key indicators to facilitate this (CIH Scotland, 2017).

The Welsh Government’s Regulatory Framework is based on expectations of robust housing association self-evaluation and annual regulatory judgements, as is the case in England (Smith, 2018). Housing associations are required to demonstrate how their tenants are effectively involved in strategic decision-making and shaping services (Welsh Government, 2017). Requirements for local authorities are less demanding and prescriptive, with no regulatory or inspection regime to promote or enforce participation (Campbell Tickell, 2014).

In Northern Ireland, the Department for Communities is the regulatory authority for Registered Social Housing Providers (RSHPs). As part of the Regulatory Framework, RSHPs must demonstrate that they have met the following consumer standard: “*Social Housing Providers manage their businesses so that tenants and other customers are encouraged to participate in the available range of participation options so that they can influence their landlord’s decisions*” (DSD, 2016). The largest social housing provider in Northern Ireland is the Northern Ireland Housing Executive. Its approach to tenant participation is outlined in its Community Involvement Strategy (NIHE, 2018).

## 1.5 Approach to the research

The report seeks to understand contemporary approaches to tenant participation in social housing. It is based on empirical work conducted with social housing providers and stakeholders across the devolved territories of the United Kingdom.

The research presented here builds on an evidence review of existing research into tenant participation in social housing (Preece, 2019), which noted a number of gaps in research. In particular, it highlighted that there is a lack of research into tenant participation in recent years, a finding in common with Serin et al’s (2018) work in a Scottish context. There is also little research into recent drivers of change in approaches, or the role of technologies in participation (Marsh, 2018). This report begins to respond to these gaps.

The number of interviews were influenced by the resources available for the project, with sampling carried out to provide an even spread of different organisational types according to:

- Size
- Location within the UK
- Provider type (housing association or local authority)
- Rural and urban providers

In total, 10 interviews were conducted with social housing providers, as detailed in the Appendix.

Stakeholders were selected to cover a range of key perspectives including:

- Representatives from Northern Ireland, Wales, Scotland and England
- Social housing sector organisations
- Tenant organisations

In total, 11 stakeholder interviews were conducted, as detailed in the Appendix. In addition to the in-depth semi-structured interviews, a focus group was conducted with a mixed group of participants, all of whom had been identified as having expertise in relation to tenant participation. The group comprised representatives from: social housing landlords; tenant and resident groups; community-led housing organisations; tenant representative bodies; government departments; tenant participation advice and support bodies; social policy and housing lobbying bodies; and, professional bodies. The focus group lasted for around an hour and a half, with 17 participants. Throughout the report interview participants are referred to by an anonymous code, beginning 'HA' for housing association respondents, 'LA' for local authority ones, and 'S' for stakeholder participants. Data from the focus group is referred to separately.

The interviews and focus group were audio recorded and transcribed to enable analysis to be undertaken. A coding framework was developed in order to organise the data around a number of key themes; these structure the report.

There are a number of limitations to the current research, which offer a number of avenues through which future research could be developed. Whilst it compares the experiences and perceptions of different participants, given the smaller sample size and the diversity of social housing provision between and within different regulatory regimes, the report does not seek to generalise to housing associations, local authorities, or nations more broadly. Rather, it offers a number of reflections on points of difference, which may provide a useful starting point for the development of a framework for comparative exploration.

Although the study captures the in-depth views of eight tenant representatives, more interviews were conducted with housing professionals in order to meet the aim of the research: to unpack landlords' approaches to tenant participation. As such, the research is largely structured by landlords' understanding of participation, and the mechanisms and structures through which it occurs.

Whilst this is valuable, and there are wider drivers that are undoubtedly influencing contemporary approaches to participation, it is also important to note that there are other avenues through which tenants influence the decision-making of social landlords, and these are less likely to be captured in this research. Foremost are the less formal ways in which individuals and groups can exert influence, and the (external) structures for participation and organising that sit outside those initiated by housing providers (Furbey et al., 1996).

## 1.6. Structure of the report

The report is divided into seven chapters, including this one. Chapter two begins by exploring the language used to describe the process that has been historically referred to as 'tenant participation', and then moves on to assess its relative importance as an organisational priority. Chapter three is concerned with exploring the purpose of tenant participation from the perspective of landlords and stakeholders and, linked to this, the benefits that are perceived to accrue from it. Chapter four conceptualises landlords' approaches to tenant engagement. It does so with particular reference to a framework generated by Cairncross et al., which emphasises the role of power and the desire of landlords to meet service goals. Chapter five begins by noting that landlords' approaches to tenant participation have changed in recent years. It then considers why this has been the case, identifying the factors that have driven their approaches to it. Chapter six identifies the key challenges identified by landlords in relation to tenant participation, while the last chapter is concerned with highlighting the key learning to emerge from the research for social housing landlords and a future research agenda.



## 2. Context for tenant participation

### 2.1 Introduction

This chapter sets the contemporary context for tenant participation, beginning with a discussion of the terminology used to refer to the different ways in which tenants are involved in influencing the activities of their landlord. The research found that, whilst language matters, in line with the findings the Regulatory Board for Wales (2019), there is little agreement on the terms used. The chapter then outlines the extent to which tenant participation was viewed as important by participants in the research, and perceptions of change over time in its prioritisation.

#### What we know already

- As noted in the previous chapter, tenant participation is a contested term (McKee and Cooper, 2008), which is sometimes used interchangeably with others (Stirling, 2019).
- Whilst tenant participation may be viewed as the 'norm' for some providers (Family Mosaic, 2015), recent events such as the Grenfell Tower fire have led to renewed attention on the extent to which resident voices are listened to and acted upon (National Housing Federation, 2019).
- There is some evidence that the Rent Reduction had a negative impact on tenant participation activities in England, as housing associations sought to balance their budgets (TAROE Trust, 2018, Rees, 2018, Hickman et al., 2018).
- Some have noted that the English regulatory regime sets a high threshold for intervention in 'consumer' matters (Shelter, 2019), which reduces the power of residents to hold housing providers to account.

### 2.2 The language of 'tenant participation'

A range of terms are used – sometimes interchangeably – to describe the activities and mechanisms through which tenants are involved in influencing their housing provider. However, these terms have a range of meanings and associations, and there is no agreed language with which to discuss (what we have called) 'tenant participation'. Most participants took a similar view, that *"initially, terminology is important. Ultimately it's not as important as the outcomes which are achieved, and what people mean by that terminology"* (S1, England). Another stakeholder noted that *"the risk is you spend the first half hour arguing about...what's the best phrase...actually, we need to focus on what's the outcome that we want here regardless of the terminology...it can become quite polarising and quite divisive"* (S8, Wales).

Therefore, *"the critical part is about being involved in decision-making"* (LA2, Scotland), *"to do it and do it well"* (S8, Wales), and to be *"building trust with your customers...acting on what's important to them, and...evidence that you're doing that"* (HA3, England). The fundamental issue was seen as: *"what powers do people who live in these homes have, what power have they got to influence and change things? I'm more interested in that than what we actually call it"* (S7, England).

Indeed, a range of different terms were used by participating organisations, but the detail of the things that they related to were often similar. Participation was noted by some as being relevant because of its long-standing use and prevalence, which meant that it had *“meaning to most people”* (LA04, Wales). Others highlighted that participation was *“the key phrase that the Scottish Government are using”* in their regulatory framework (S2, Scotland). Whilst it could be *“a good catch all term”*, *“there is still a lot more thinking [about] what is actually meant by that and what we’re trying to achieve”* (S3, Scotland).

For other landlords, participation was *“not terminology that we use...it’s beginning to sound a bit old fashioned... ‘participate’...doesn’t really for us embody the fact that you’re there to be part of the decision-making...Participation to me just means to be there...taking part”* (HA2, Scotland). A distinction was therefore drawn between being part of a discussion, and actually taking decisions, or setting the agenda, which ‘participation’ was not thought to reflect. It can therefore be seen that whilst some participants did not feel terminology was crucial, for others the meaning of terms was important and language could be used to signify the level of change or power: *“...so you can be engaged... you’ve answered a survey...involvement [is] a bit further on than that...you might participate in a performance monitoring group... involvement with the processes of your landlord. Then empowerment is when you’re really able to challenge a landlord, where you’ve perhaps got devolved budgets...where you’re making decisions”* (S4, England).

Participation could be associated with *“tokenism...We do need a new term for this, but for me it would have to incorporate more shared power and shared responsibilities than just participation. I accept participation is a little weak”* (S5r1, Wales). It was also viewed as *“a bit paternalistic...we will let you participate for a bit in something...it doesn’t change anything just because you’ve participated...whereas hopefully you would want to see involvement and empowerment being words that we talk about real change”* (S4, England). Others argued that engagement captured a wider range of mechanisms through which individuals could influence, because *“tenants are engaging with us, but they might not feel like they’re actually participating...you can hear what tenants are telling you in lots of different ways and that’s not always through participation”* (HA3, England).

Discussing the move towards the term ‘tenant voice’, participants associated this – in part – with *“a broader voice that is not just linked to the tenant and landlord relationship”* and was *“heterogeneous...but it’s still a collective”* (S1, England). Others pointed to national government, noting that: *“...we all have to follow the language governments use at some points, but I think...more tenants are getting naffed off with that. It’s like: ‘we have a voice. It’s just whether you’re choosing to listen to it or not!’...Equally, for a very short concept it’s quite powerful. Your tenant voice / resident voice, as a collective, I think works”* (S4, England).

The use of terms such as ‘tenants’ and ‘residents’ and ‘customers’ was also important because: *“We’ve seen, particularly in the housing association sector...a strong movement towards the use of...‘customer’. And whilst that has had positive effects in terms of improving services, potentially, there are other tenants that have seen that as quite an affront because...‘we don’t have the same levels of choice...we can’t just walk with our feet’. Also it overlooks all of those rights and obligations that the landlord has”* (S1, England).

Among participating housing providers different terms were used, but some expressed similar sentiments, with tenants preferring that term because *“we can’t just walk away”* but also, *“we are proud to be tenants, that’s what we are”* (LA4, Wales).

## 2.3 The prioritisation of tenant participation within organisations

For housing associations and local authorities, tenant participation was viewed as “critical” (LA3, England), both in terms of the wider organisation and the specific job roles of some individuals. For example, one participant noted that they spent a “fairly significant” proportion of time on tenant participation, which was also “massively supported in the wider organisation and the political structure” at the local authority (LA3, England). Most participants in Scotland highlighted the importance of different forms of participation, which were “a key focus for all social landlords and local authorities, as obviously we’ve got quite a history of legislation...that’s reflected in the Scottish Social Housing Charter...it’s still a key focus for the Scottish Government and for the regulator” (S2, Scotland).

However, a number of participants – particularly in England – voiced their perception of a shift over time in relation to the importance of tenant participation. Many stakeholders believed that participation had become less of an organisational priority among the housing providers they had knowledge of:

*“You can absolutely track from 2015 and the rent cut. But even heading up to that...when the regulatory framework changed, once the TSA went, once we had a regulator that was hands-off around consumer regulations. From that point...there was a decline in engagement, without a doubt...2015 to Grenfell it went even worse with people cutting involvement...saying it wasn’t a priority...That was the worst time for me in tenant engagement...Grenfell obviously changes the game completely” (S4, England).*

This shift was also reflected at Board level, with “the lessening of the influence of tenants in that decision-making process”, with those landlords “which maintain a very strong focus on tenants as part of the decision-making process...almost now kind of outliers to the general approach” (S1, England). This variance was noted by others: “I don’t think it’s much of a priority really...except in the better landlords where they understood the value of it” (S7, England). Describing their experiences of comparing their performance against others, one participant argued that for some providers tenant participation “wasn’t at the top of their agenda...I came out...feeling proud of [our Board] because I do believe it’s very important to them” (HA3, England). For this housing association, participation was “one of the key priorities”, and “it’s always been really important to the Board. I think post-Grenfell, I wouldn’t say it’s more on their agenda, I just think it’s more visible” (HA3, England).

By contrast, in Scotland tenant participation was generally thought to be becoming more important, for some, because “the push on from the Scottish Government” meant that “we’d have to start taking tenant participation seriously again” (HA1, Scotland). Where participation had perhaps not been prioritised, “all of a sudden...the government changes, so it was ‘no, we need to make sure we find time for this, the other things can wait’...so it’s definitely two or three years I would say become a bigger priority” (LA1, Scotland). Consequently, “it’s become more important...I think particularly...in Scotland, since the Charter came in...there’s far more onus on landlords that they have to listen to tenants, they have to demonstrate that they listen to tenants and involve tenants” (LA2, Scotland).

The view from Wales was also that tenant participation was more of an organisational priority than in England, because “the regulator is very clear it’s part of their regulatory judgement, which I don’t think has the same weight in England, but also...there’s a more collaborative culture in Wales” (S5r1, Wales). Rather than declining influence at Board level, some noted that: “What has changed is a real focus in Wales on...how do the Board really know what it thinks it knows, and I think there’s a growing understanding that tenant participation [is]...one of the really important steps that you must go through when you’re developing your approach and your decision-making” (S8, Wales).

The role of governance and regulation will be discussed further in Chapter Five as key drivers of changing approaches to participation. The next chapter is concerned with exploring landlords’ rationales for undertaking tenant participation and, linked to this, their views on its benefits.

## 3. The purpose and benefits of tenant participation

### 3.1. Introduction

Interviewees were asked to identify what they thought the purpose of tenant participation was and, linked to this, its benefits. In most instances respondents saw its benefits and purpose as being 'one in the same thing' so we treat them together in the analysis that follows. It was reported that the benefits of tenant participation were wide ranging: *"So it's really hard to say what all the benefits are cos they can be so varied. But there are clear organisational service improvement benefits, clear financial benefits if done well. And there are clear neighbourhood and individual, social benefits"* (EngLA01). As highlighted in this quote and the following one, these benefits could be categorised into three broad groups: commercial benefits relating to the housing service; benefits to individual tenants; and social benefits to local communities: *"Why should anybody do it [tenant participation]? ... It's a business case. And it's personal. It's social"* (S04JP).

#### What we know already

- It is not always evident what tenant participation is seeking to achieve and why it is undertaken (Regulatory Board for Wales, 2019).
- However, many landlords see tenant involvement as a route to business improvement, rather than a way of supporting collective voice, representation, and activism (Bradley, 2012, Jensen, 1998; Hickman, 2006).
- Tenant participation can result in service improvements and enhanced performance, and, as a result, better value for money (CIH Scotland, 2017; Manzi, et al, 2015)
- Benefits may accrue to tenants from participation, such as enhanced well-being and greater confidence (Cole et al., 1999)
- Tunstall and Pleace (2018, p.74) note that there is *"little recent evidence on the prevalence and effectiveness of tenant participation structures and methods."*

### 3.2. Benefits to the housing service

All respondents believed that involving tenants in the housing service resulted in an improved service and this was the most commonly cited and important reason given for why landlords undertook tenant participation. This rationale is described as being 'consumerist' in perhaps the most helpful framework to date of understanding approaches to tenant participation: Cairncross et al's (1994) *consumerist, citizenship* and *traditional* typology. In the consumerist model, tenant participation is seen as a mechanism for providing better services for tenants as consumers (Hickman, 2006).

Involving tenants brought a number of commercial benefits to landlords. First, it resulted in an improved housing service: *"From my point of view it's about ensuring continuity and improvement of your services and making sure they stay relevant and in tune with the expectations of our tenants"* (LA3, England). This in turn resulted in a second benefit to accrue from involving tenants in the housing service: higher tenant satisfaction scores: *"From the landlord's perspective, for me [tenant participation] it's around improving the service that's being delivered to the tenant. Secondly, it's around not just improving the service but also the satisfaction levels on the part of tenants with regard to the services that are being delivered by the landlords"* (Northern Ireland based organisation, focus group).

This benefit appeared to be of particular importance to landlords in Scotland, which is not unexpected given the emphasis placed by its regulatory framework on performance measurement. As one Scottish landlord noted:

*“Our satisfaction levels are amongst the highest in the UK. I’m sure you’re aware. It’s about 91% for a landlord of that scale . . . [that] is huge. And that is the yardstick by which we measure ourselves, tenant satisfaction, above all else. So, if we want to maintain that, which we do, then actually, the most obviously logical way to do it, is to have tenants deciding, or heavily involved in the key decisions we make. And the logical outcome therefore is that they would be happy with the landlord because we’re doing what they want us to do” (HA2, Scotland).*

Third, involving tenants resulted in better decisions being made: *“I think they [landlords] would see the point of it [tenant participation] is to make better decisions. It improves the service. Improves the quality and improves the decisions you make and helps you prevent unintended consequences” (S8, Wales).* These included ‘higher order’ decisions relating to a number of key operational and strategic areas such as rent setting and development: *“I think it’s increasingly seen as good business sense, as integral to making the right decisions as an organisation. And that goes right to the heart of the big decisions around new development of a programme or how much rent you charge. The core values” (S8, Wales).*

Fourth, in the context of having to manage limited resources, involving tenants helped landlords to allocate resource in a more effective way: *“Just a really simple one [benefit of tenant participation]. It’s been alluded to. But about allocation of resources. If you don’t actually talk to the people who are going to be using the service about what they want you waste time and money doing something that’s not wanted and not needed. And there are very few in housing that have unlimited resources any more” (housing association officer, focus group).*

Involving tenants also prevented what one respondent described as “over-serving” i.e. allocating too much resource to an area of the housing service: *“Xx [Chief Executive] at [a housing association] talks a lot about ‘over-serving’. And I think we forget to talk about that sometimes. His tenants . . . said: ‘You’re doing too much. You could cut this and this will be fine. We don’t need all of this that you’ve been giving us’. So, involving tenants who go: ‘You don’t need to do half of this, but we’d really like you to do this’” (HA4, England).*

Preventing “over-serving” and better decision-making resulted in cost efficiencies. A member of the focus group noted that involving tenants in the procurement process and other aspects of the housing service had resulted in their organisation making cost savings of £2.5 million per annum:

*“We’re a merger organisation. Xx, one of our predecessors, did quite a bit of research a few years ago that showed that we were driving cost savings of about £2½ million/year by involving residents in services and procurement and other things” (housing association officer, focus group).* In a similar vein, a Welsh landlord noted: *“It’s probably the things that most people would say, in terms of an improved service for tenants, cost efficiencies for the local authority if we can and making sure we’re delivering the right services” (LA4, Wales).*

Involving tenants could result in (beneficial) interventions and outcomes that landlords had not considered: *“Often you get a very different outcome by engagement than you would have done if you hadn’t done it” (EngLA01).* Likewise, another respondent noted: *“So I think you’re getting landlords to understand that by involving tenants doesn’t mean you’re going to end up with a load of problems. They will give you solutions that you haven’t thought of. So, when landlords get that and they see evidence of that, they go: ‘Yeah’” (S4, England).*

Finally, involving tenants could result in additional resource being devoted to the housing service as tenant representatives fulfilled ‘ambassadorial’ or “involvement champion” roles in neighbourhoods, gathering information for landlords and providing a link between them and the wider tenant population: *“They become perhaps a resident involvement champion in your estate. They become your eyes and ears. They give you information. They talk to other tenants on your behalf in a way that staff can’t do. They are ambassadors to your MPs and your councillors in a way that again staff can’t do. So the ripple goes out, and out, and out” (S4, England).*

### 3.3. Individual and social benefits of tenant participation

A number of individual benefits accrued from involving tenants in the housing service, it was reported. First, it (potentially) provided tenants with 'voice', agency and influence. Ensuring that this happened was one of the main purposes of tenant participation for many landlords. *"The other thing that's quite big for us is all our customers feel they've got control and choice"* (ScotHA02). It was particularly important to provide social renters with an opportunity to influence the housing service because they could not easily move to another provider and because, felt one housing association officer: *"[they] don't always have a lot of choices"* (HA2, Scotland). They continued:

*"So me for example, if I don't like my house, I can sell it and get a new one. If I'm in the private sector and I don't like my landlord I've got much more choice than some social housing tenants will have. So, demand far outstrips supply, which means there's not a lot of choice. But what we don't want it to feel like is that they don't have choices. Or that they don't have control over their own lives. So, that's a big issue for us in terms of, you can get involved and you can influence things in your community and your home more generally"* (HA2, Scotland).

Interestingly, a landlord who saw the purpose of tenant participation as primarily being about improving the housing service also shared the same view: *"The final thing is I think we feel really strongly that it [tenant participation] is right in principle. And we're very aware as a landlord that in life if you're providing any other service, if that service isn't good enough or it's getting worse or if the person in Sainsbury's screams at you then you're going to go to Tesco. Actually tenants can't exercise that choice. They're customers but they're trapped with one provider. So for that reason we think it's right and principled. It's critical that landlords are speaking to tenants, that tenants are involved"* (LA4, Wales).

But for landlords who saw the primary purpose of tenant participation as being about giving tenants' voice, they involved them because it *"was the right thing to do"* (Northern Ireland based organisation, focus group) and not because their input would result in a better housing service and commercial benefits to the landlord. This rationale for tenant participation is consistent with the *citizenship* approach in Cairncross et al's model, which characterises tenant participation as being concerned with empowering tenants and giving them genuine voice in the housing system. In *citizenship* approaches there is *"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, p.32).

Smaller, community-based housing associations were more likely to view the purpose of tenant participation in this way. This was the case for those based in older industrial areas, including the Midlands, who saw themselves as being part of the *"fabric"* of local communities in disadvantaged neighbourhoods, with resident involvement being central to their work within them:

*"I think particularly when you look in the Midlands and industrial... areas, I think housing associations act as community anchor organisations. They're the only stable multi-million pound businesses in the area. And I think in those cases their resident engagement is around a genuine deep-seated belief in the area and they consider themselves to be part of the fabric of the community. And they take that responsibility quite seriously. And I think we shouldn't play down the social mission of a lot of housing associations, particularly in deprived areas"* (stakeholder, focus Group).

It was also the case for smaller, community-based landlords in Scotland, and Glasgow especially, many of whom had their origins in local communities. One stakeholder noted that the social function of these organisations was more important than their housing role, with the emphasis they placed on promoting resident voice being consistent with this:

*"I think obviously it [tenant participation] is a broad church. But as we mentioned, there is a lot of community-based organisations across Scotland, particularly in Glasgow. And I think there is a view that these organisations exist for the tenants and it's part of a movement that you can be involved in which is why tenant voice is so important. Because it's a social enterprise that has houses rather than a landlord that does social stuff"* (S3, Scotland).

For landlords who (in part) saw the purpose of tenant participation as being about *citizenship*, the process of conducting tenant participation had value in itself, with it not solely being concerned with outcomes: *"I think what that report from the regulatory board is saying is maybe it's not always about having a distinct outcome. It's about building those relationships and having that trust between you and then you can go on to do the kind of things you want to do"* (LA4, Wales).

Some landlords understood tenant participation to be both consumerist and citizenship in terms of its purpose. Many were also committed to retaining control over the participation process, which is one of the defining features of the *traditional* type in Cairncross et al's framework. Hence, competing rationales for tenant participation could often co-exist:

*"I think there's a lot in there and part of it [tenant participation] is down to control; managing the narrative. I think there's a bit of that. Part of it is driven by people's business objectives. ... so there are different competing things. But in lots of organisations there's a genuine desire to reach out and get the voice of the tenants for those very positive reasons. So I think they co-exist at the same time in any organisation, even smaller ones"* (housing association officer, focus group).

The same landlord noted that many tenants valued the social interaction that came with (face-to-face) tenant participation, which is another important individual benefit to accrue from tenant participation: *"We're running a business at the end of the day. But there are other benefits for some of our tenants. Some of them are not really that interested in the detail of what we're talking about. They just like the company. [A] cup of tea and a biscuit and a chance to get out of the house sometimes, I think. ... I think that is a spin off that some of our tenants get and for whatever reason they're [not]... getting that from any other involvement anywhere"* (LA4, Wales).

Tenant participation brought other benefits to the individual: *"Again, at the same time you've got all those benefits of tenants building up skills, being more confident, being empowered."* (S2, Scotland). In a similar vein, an England-based stakeholder - S4 - noted: *"So, how you get somebody to engage; what does that spin-off in terms of their increased confidence?"*

Involving tenants also resulted in some of them being upskilled, making them better placed to find employment. For example, S4 (England) noted how this had been the case for one of their tenants:

*"There's also the examples of people in our homes that are low-skilled. They perhaps have been carers. Again you see housing officers identifying those people. Getting them involved and then you see progression. A great example ... [of someone] ... struggling. She came to an involvement meeting. Got involved. Got more confident. She worked up. She went to the scrutiny panel. She then became a board member, and as a result of being a board member, is in paid employment and speaks on national platforms all over the country. And there's loads of examples of that."*

Many interviewees reported that social benefits accrued from tenant participation. In addition to facilitating social interaction within neighbourhoods, it helped to foster social cohesion within communities: *“But also in terms of tenant-to-tenant engagement, there is the social cohesion which comes with being involved with that process”* (tenant representative, focus group).

Tenant participation also helped to encourage interaction between generations, thereby helping to build trust. LA3 (England) noted how part of the work of a multi-storey ‘task and finish group’ had involved a tenants’ and residents’ group working closely with a local sixth- form college, to great effect: *“One of our projects, we’ve got a high rise, 18 storey or something, block which is predominantly sheltered and they have a very active tenants group. Some of that might be knit and natter type stuff. They’ve done a community garden on the bottom of the block of flats and it’s lovely but they’ve got the local sixth- form college in to work with them on it. So the benefits of intergenerational engagement are massive”* (LA3, England).



## 4. Understanding and conceptualising approaches to tenant participation

### 4.1. Introduction

This chapter is concerned with making sense of landlords' approaches to tenant participation. In doing so, it draws extensively on the most widely used, and still relevant, conceptual framework for understanding them: Cairncross et al's, *consumerist*, *citizenship* and *traditional* framework. The chapter begins by exploring some of the ways approaches to tenant participation can be framed.

#### What we know already

- Tenant participation has developed in a disparate way, resulting in a wide range of different approaches and techniques being employed (Hickman, 2006; Reid and Hickman, 2002).
- Many social housing landlords offer a 'menu' of different forms of participation. Tenants can choose from a range of options including formal and informal involvement, long- and short-term activities, and specific forms of participation to reach under-represented groups (Pawson et al., 2012).
- However, critics have argued that 'choice' can be used "to give the illusion of participation" when they are actually mechanisms for regulating decision-making and a diversion from giving tenants meaningful 'voice' (Reid and Hickman, 2002, p.194).
- There are many ways of understanding power and there has been much debate about how it should be conceptualised in the context of tenant participation (Preece, 2019).
- Somerville (1998, p.234) argues that tenant participation must be concerned with empowering tenants and if this is not the case, then it is "a confidence trick performed by the controllers of an activity on participants in that activity". The empowerment process can be both top-down, initiated by those who have power, and bottom-up, initiated by those who are seeking power (Somerville, 1998)
- Many landlords are reluctant to cede power to their tenants and so retain control of the participation process (Reid and Hickman, 2002, Hickman, 2006)
- Landlords are moving towards a more individualised, consumerist approach to tenant participation (Pawson et al., 2012).
- Housing providers and stakeholders have reported a decline in the number of tenant and resident associations (Family Mosaic, 2015, TAROE Trust, 2018, London Assembly, 2018).
- Engaging tenants via digital platforms has become more prevalent in recent years (London Assembly, 2018).

## 4.2 Framing approaches to tenant participation

The approaches taken by landlords to tenant participation varied. Given their differing rationales for involving tenants, as noted in the preceding chapter, and the diversity of the sector, this is perhaps not surprising. Notwithstanding this, their approaches can be framed in a number of ways. For example, a distinction can also be made between those structures where tenants manage or own the housing stock, such as cooperatives, and 'mainstream' tenant participation where the housing stock is managed by social housing landlords. Another paradigm is the housing mutual model, where the housing stock is owned by tenants and employees of the organisation. Finally, for housing associations, a distinction can be made between tenant participation in the form of tenant representation on boards and 'mainstream' tenant participation.

In terms of 'mainstream' participation, distinctions can be made between collective and individual forms of engagement, with the latter reportedly becoming increasingly prevalent, and between landlord-initiated structures, such as forums and scrutiny panels, and those initiated by tenants, such as tenant and resident associations (TRAs) (Family Mosaic, 2015). A contrast can also be made between long-standing tenant participation structures, such as TRAs, and 'new' involvement mechanisms, such as digital engagement and scrutiny panels. A dichotomy also exists between what one respondent described as "business" related participation and "fun" related activities: *"You've got the business side [of tenant participation] which is scrutiny. The resident groups and things like that. Then the fun side which is doing events. So, when it comes to [the] fun side of things we open that up to the community and work with other partners within the community...There's no point in us saying we're going to run an event and put on a coffee morning"* (ScotHA01).

Approaches to tenant participation can be framed in other ways. Some respondents distinguished between informal participation and formal engagement, through structures such as tenants' and residents' associations and landlord initiated mechanisms to review and improve the housing service. There was a consensus that, historically, the principal way that landlords have engaged with their tenants is through formal mechanisms: *"Tenant participation to me suggests something quite formal. And quite a lot of the focus to date has been quite formal interactions. So there's registers, tenant organisations. There's formal structures for tenants to get engaged if they want to"* (S2, Scotland).

Some landlords also differentiated between what they described as an 'embedded' approach to tenant participation, where engagement was the responsibility of all staff, and a 'functional' approach, which saw it being primarily the responsibility of a discrete and dedicated team. Most of the landlords that participated in the study adopted the latter approach. The issue of 'embedding' tenant participation is explored in 6.2.

Approaches to tenant participation may also be understood and conceptualised with reference to Cairncross et al's consumerist *citizenship* and *traditional* typology. Landlords had put in place structures that were concerned with service improvement - i.e. consumerist - and empowering tenants (citizenship). And a defining feature of many landlords' approach to tenant participation was their control over the process, which is one of the hallmarks of the third of Cairncross et al's three types: traditional. However, in line with the findings of Hickman (2006), landlords could not be neatly classified into one of the three types: many employed approaches that had characteristics of all three types.

The remainder of the chapter focuses on unpacking approaches to tenant participation through the lens of two of these paradigms - 'new' versus 'old'; and Cairncross et al's, framework, with particular attention focusing on the issue that is at its heart: power.

### 4.3 'New' versus 'old'

Historically, TRAs and (in some areas) tenants' federations have been the principal mechanism by which landlords have engaged with their tenants. A number of respondents highlighted the importance of these groups and the value of collective engagement, which allowed tenants to support each other. As a tenant representative noted:

*"Well, tenants live in their homes and they care about them so they deserve to be involved in everything that happens to their homes. I think the best way for them to be involved is collectively ... Because then they can support each other in asking for, or making sure that their homes are properly looked after and that they get the rights that they deserve as far as their homes are concerned. If people are isolated or alone it's much more difficult for them to represent themselves. Much more difficult" (tenant representative, focus group).*

Some respondents reported that TRAs provided a more 'bottom-up' and independent perspective on key housing issues. As two tenant activists noted: *"I just want to say again, in my view good tenant participation is democratic structures from the bottom up (stakeholder, focus group)"* and *"I think it is exactly as xx has just said, that good tenant participation is predicated on democratic structures and it comes from the bottom-up, not the top-down"* (stakeholder, focus group).

However, there was a belief that the importance of TRAs and tenants' federations had declined in the last decade. Their numbers had reduced in many parts of the UK, as had their influence: *"Again not to overplay it, but the last 10 years saw a lot of tenants' and residents' groups fold, not be supported anymore. Federations close. All of that"* (S4, England). However, the same respondent felt that this trend had reversed in recent times: *"We've seen fairly gradually, but definitely, there's a resurgence again of tenant-resident association"*. They continued by noting that the (quantitative and qualitative) decline in tenant bodies could be attributed to their failure to recognise that they had little influence and power, which led to unrealistic expectations, and, a result, conflict *"But then where tenants and residents groups in the past got confused, or conflict arose, was because they thought they had power and influence and they didn't. They thought they did"* (S4, England).

Linked to this, there was a belief that the role of TRAs had changed in many areas: increasingly they are primarily concerned with community and social issues, with less involvement in the housing service. While recognising the important role that TRAs fulfilled, one stakeholder welcomed this change of focus. This was because they were concerned about their (lack of) representativeness:

*"My personal view is there is a place for it [TRAs]. However, I think where it's problematic is if that is seen as the official way of seeking views and everything else [other, less formal forms of engagement] is seen as not quite given the same credibility, because it can become marginalised. If you've got parental responsibilities or you work or whatever it is, you can't spend two hours in a draughty town hall talking about service charges. So I think there's definitely space for both. And we are seeing housing associations making sure that they've looked at both"* (S8, Wales).

Another housing association highlighted concerns about the representativeness of the tenants' federation in its area, which, historically, had been the principal mechanism by which it engaged with its tenants. Because of these concerns, it was reviewing its approach to tenant participation:

*"We've got quite a long-standing independent tenant body here called the xx Federation and the committee. There are about 3 or 400 members. But they have a committee and the committee members. The chair, in particular, and the treasurer, secretary have been in those positions for quite a long time. One of the things we're trying to change through our new strategy is to have a broader representation around the table really cos we're very conscious the people we're hearing from a lot of the time if I'm honest are older, white women mainly. So we need to have more diverse representation in our engagement mechanisms"* (HA3, England).

One respondent believed that newly formed TRAs functioned differently than their longer standing counterparts. They were more estate, community and task focused: when a project was complete they did not, necessarily, have to continue:

*"I think the tenant-resident groups that are set-up now are recognising more: 'We're here, because we're an estate. We want to do things. We want to put fun days on. We want to fundraise. We want a new garden. That's what we're here to do'. And it's perfectly legitimate and great and they should be doing that. You don't need to be bound by loads of constitutional rules. Let's just get on and do things. The whole mentality has changed in engagement anyway to: 'Let's get on with doing things. Let's do a project and let's complete it. Let's move on to something else'. Let's not just have never-ending groups forever" (S4, England).*

One of the key reasons for the decline in the influence of tenant representative bodies has been the employment by landlords of other tenant participation mechanisms, both collective vehicles, such as scrutiny panels and tenant sounding boards, and individual ones, such as surveys, mystery shopping and citizens panels. One 'new' engagement mechanism that has received attention in recent times is digital engagement. The research found that many landlords are engaging with their tenants 'digitally'. And the number doing so has grown in recent years: *"An increasing number of landlords are using digital platforms to engage with their tenants and have digitised their services"* (S9, England). However, there was a belief that for most small and medium landlords, digital engagement was not a key element of their approach to tenant participation, although that was not the case for some large landlords who reportedly had put significant resource into digital mechanisms: *"I think it [digital engagement] is coming. But my perception is that it still plays quite a minor role. I think some of the bigger landlords have invested in it quite heavily and those with quite wide-ranging stock have invested in it heavily because they've got to reach a wider group"* (housing association officer, focus group).

It was reported that landlords in England were more likely than their counterparts in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland to be engaging with their tenants digitally: *"They're encouraging their tenants to go online; and this probably is more common in England. It doesn't really happen a lot up here [Scotland]"* (S2, Scotland). Landlords employed a range of digital platforms including: online surveys; online forums and panels; SMS texting; and social media forums, such as Facebook and Twitter: *"I think there's a bit of everything now. We're starting to see online panels, video work. We're starting to use Facebook as a targeting tool to get messages out there ... So I think we are turning the corner on some of the innovation"* (S07r1PH, Wales). A stakeholder believed that engaging with tenants digitally was highly effective: *"Digital engagement is brilliant. We've got loads of examples of people doing that really well. I think it is the way, and that's across all the channels ... Facebook is ... popular ... Twitter is important. They're all important"* (S4, England).

One of the benefits of digital engagement was that it extended the reach of tenant participation, engaging with tenants who typically did not engage with collective, formal tenant participation mechanisms such as TRAs: by doing so it allowed more – and different – tenants to be involved in the process. One landlord noted how the number of tenants it could engage through digital mechanisms (100) outnumbered those who could be involved through long-standing, 'traditional' methods (25 to 50), with population groups who were historically hard to engage being more likely to participate:

*"The problem with that [collective engagement] is if landlords only can use those forms of involvement they say, well we have only reached 25 or 50 tenants. They're not necessarily representative. And therefore across the board we have seen a shift towards more online, snap survey type approaches, text and some specific sort of software to support very quick decision-making. ...100 tenants who have said: 'We are really interested in, say, new building standards'. And that they can go to those groups and there are people who are not being bothered who may or not be interested These people have said: 'Well, it would be quite interesting on this topic if you get in touch with me.' So you can see how it can lead to richer results, and I can't be critical of any of those things"* (S1, England).

This was one of the main reasons why landlords had introduced digital tenant participation mechanisms. But there were others. These included: the desire to provide tenants with more choices in relation to how they engaged, an issue which is explored in more depth later in this chapter; and, the changing demographic profile of the tenants of some landlords. As will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Five, for those landlords with higher proportions of young tenants, for whom engagement online was more likely to be 'normal' and something they were comfortable with, digital engagement was a natural evolution of their approach to tenant participation. It was important that digital mechanisms were used alongside long-standing, 'traditional' ones: *"We should be doing more of it [digital engagement]. However, for certain pieces of tenant involvement you need to have structures and you need to have meetings. I'm bored of saying it. I'm sure people are bored of hearing me saying it. It's a blend of both. There's just no two ways about it. And then it's just getting the blend right"* (S4, England).

There were two reasons for this. First, it was consistent with a key tenant participation objective for many landlords, which is discussed in the next section: providing tenants with a range of ways of engaging with the housing service. Second, there were concerns about digital engagement. There was widespread concern that digital platforms excluded those tenants who did not have access to them or were not comfortable engaging digitally. This concern was the principal reason why one housing association had been reluctant to put in place digital engagement mechanisms: *"We don't do much about it, partly because we do recognise that a large number of tenants don't have access to the means of engaging through that route. So it would be disempowering to rely on that at this stage"* (housing officer, focus group).

There was also concern that digital mechanisms were not appropriate for dealing with complex issues, which were the norm in relation to the housing service: *"There are so many complex issues that come up in housing, many of which are out of policy. So it means that somebody has to make a decision about it. And so because you've got a situation where you're doing everything digitally, it means there's complex problems that are not being addressed"* (S7, England). Complex issues could only be tackled, the stakeholder continued, through face-to-face interaction: *"You need to have human interaction to engage on certain things and I know this from [where I live]. People have problems and things come up and we have to think of the best way to deal with them. And they're not things you can write a policy to deal with. So the only way you can really deal with them is by talking to the tenants, people who might be giving them support etc"* (S7, England). In a similar vein, another stakeholder noted that face-to-face conversations were important because of their "richness": *"You shouldn't lose sight that there is value in face-to-face consultation and that, whilst online forums of involvement in engagement are really good and have the purpose as part of the plethora, there is a certain richness to having face-to-face conversations, which you will not achieve through online forums"* (S1, England).

Another respondent noted that the most effective way of engaging tenants in high density areas, such as estates, was face-to-face interaction with tenants where they lived. This approach worked better than newer approaches such as digital methods: *"But for others, and particularly some of the very place-based ones, it's still boots on the ground. And it's still officers being around talking to people. It's still estate walkabouts. Feeding that information back into the centre"* (S4, England).

It was noted that the greater reach of digital engagement should not be read as indicating that it was more credible and had more value than 'traditional', face-to-face collective engagement: *"Because you have got greater numbers through the use of new technology and so forth, and new and different people [participating] it gets people saying: 'Oh, well that must be more valid and therefore we don't need to do those other things.' And that becomes the preferred or the only route. So I don't think it should be at the expense of still having conversations with people"* (S7, England).

## 4.4. Consumerist, citizenship and traditional approaches

### Prevalence of the consumerist paradigm

Most of the tenant participation structures put in place by landlords who took part in the study were concerned with improving the housing service. Consumerist oriented structures included tenant panels, surveys, mystery shopping exercises, and scrutiny panels. Scrutiny panels were a key element of many landlords' approaches. A Scottish stakeholder noted how the Scottish Social Housing Charter had been a catalyst towards their employment in Scotland: "So, with the introduction of the Housing Charter that did place an emphasis on tenant scrutiny and also on the landlords' duty to build capacity of tenants, so that they're able to actually do a good job of scrutiny" (S3, Scotland).

An English local authority highlighted how beneficial the scrutiny work undertaken by its residents' federation had been to their organisation. The federation had a scrutiny panel which had recently completed reviews of a number of housing services. And one of the reviews had resulted in the creation of a new neighbourhood warden post and the repairs service being brought back 'in-house':

*"It [tenant participation] has been particularly [beneficial] in terms of the scrutiny work that our residents' federation do. They have a scrutiny panel that has taken quite a detailed look at some of our service areas, supported by xx [a tenant participation advice and support organisation]. Actually, they've done a number of scrutiny reviews over the years, one of which led to us taking on a post, a neighbourhood warden. And on the back of that taking our repairs service in-house. So that came out of tenant participation really. They've just concluded a scrutiny review of our landlord services, estate services, gardening, cleaning, that kind of thing. They report those findings directly to our risk management committee and then we will have to act on those recommendations. So there are quite detailed examples of where service improvements have resulted" (LA3, England).*

But as highlighted in the above quote, and the following one, while scrutiny panels could make recommendations, they were (invariably) not, ultimately, responsible for making decisions: "So it [the scrutiny panel] can recommend and they have a voice, but then it's transferred onto the decision-making bodies. But in Wales scrutiny committees don't really have overall decision-making it's more the cabinet" (LA4, Wales).

### Citizenship and traditional approaches - understanding power relationships

In Cairncross et al's framework, citizenship-oriented landlords are concerned with empowering their tenants while those who are traditional in their approach are concerned with retaining it. In traditional authorities, Cairncross et al. argued that participation was often very limited, with councillors seeing themselves (and not tenant representatives) as the 'true voice' of tenants. Critically, it was desire to retain power that drove their approach to tenant participation, with tenant participation being a top-down process (Hickman, 2006).

The research revealed an unclear picture with landlords' approaches not falling neatly into the traditional and citizenship categories. Instead, it found the following:

- Examples of landlords who participated in the study empowering their tenants in line with the citizenship approach. And across the sector as a whole there are many other examples.
- Many landlords highlighted the importance of providing tenants with a range of choices in relation to how they engaged, which appears to be driven by a citizenship rationale - i.e. ensuring that the voices of more tenants are heard.

- It was reported that (when viewed nationally) tenants' powers in relation to 'mainstream' tenant participation were relatively limited in England (especially) and Wales. This was because many landlords appeared reluctant to cede power to their tenants, which is the defining characteristic of the traditional approach.
- Many landlords distinguished between 'influence' and 'power', with many reporting that their focus was on providing their tenants with influence over the decision-making process and not on 'empowering' them.

### Citizenship approaches

Numerous examples of citizenship approaches to tenant participation can be seen across the UK, including participatory budgeting, cooperatives, and community-based (and sometimes community-controlled) housing associations. In relation to the landlords who took part in the study, they employed a number of approaches that they believed were concerned with empowering tenants, albeit to varying degrees. Two were concerned with the governance arrangements of landlords. All of the housing associations in our sample had tenants on their boards. This gave them real power and allowed them to influence the decision-making process, argued one stakeholder:

*"I think where tenants are on the Board they do have power... I would say that when there are tenants on the Board they do have a level of power to make decisions and directly work off the housing association... so I think governance is one of the important strands ... they are run by Board members who are very often made up of tenants ... So that's where decisions are being made and where there's a lot of power concentrated into the hands potentially of tenants. So they are having a real say in how the association is run on their behalf" (S3, Scotland).*

EngHA01 had tenants sitting on its board. However, it was quick to out that their role was not to represent the broader tenant body as they had a mechanism - a forum for service improvement - for doing this. Instead they sat on the Board in an individual capacity:

*"We do have four places on the board for tenant, leaseholder board members. Not representatives of tenants. They would be board members in their own right. And we have had a number over the years and in the last year we've lost two I think just cos they've moved on. So we don't have any currently but there are four places on the board. So they have been on the board when strategic decisions have been made. The business plan and the priorities are probably the most strategic decisions and those are shaped by the tenant influence coming through the ... forum, coming through to the board seminar. So they do sit around the table when the board are making those decisions about business priorities. Our vision. Our values" (HA3, England).*

A tenant representative who was active in a tenant and employee housing mutual felt the same way: *"When you're a tenant board member you're not there as a tenant. You're there as a non-executive. So you're not actually representing tenants ... You're there as a non-executive board member. Forget the word 'tenant'. It's the same as when we were four, four, four [on the Board] when the councillors came in they had to take off their councillor's hat and become a non-executive board member, which is really difficult to do."*

The governance structures of the tenant/ employee housing mutual that participated in the study also sought to empower tenants. It did so by giving them (along with employees) an opportunity to control the future direction of the organisation by allowing them to become members: *"We have given the control over the future of the organisation to tenants and employees. Membership gives tenants and employees control over decisions that affect them, their home, their job and the local community" (Organisational literature).*

Tenants of this organisation were able to exert influence in another way: the 'Democratic Body'. Its purpose was to allow tenants to influence the decision-making process in the organisation, in doing so, ensuring that they were involved in decisions like rent setting and the appointment of the Chief Executive: *"They are there to represent members and making sure their voices are heard and fed into the decision-making processes. They set our mutual's aims and objectives, and influence key decisions, such as how we set our rent."* (Organisational literature). The body comprises 11 tenant representatives, who are elected by tenant members, eight employee representatives and two local authority representatives. And until recently the chair of the body was a tenant. A tenant representative on the body was full of praise for it, noting that it conferred more power to tenants than did the organisation's board: *"I can honestly tell you that I feel I have more power as a member of the democratic body in xx [mutual] than I did as a board member. ... But the democratic body really hold the board to account. Whereas when you're on the board you are the board and that was it"* (HA5r2, Wales).

They also noted that tenants were happier to join the democratic body than the board, because board membership came with legal responsibility, something which some tenants did not want: *"Yes [tenants on the board have] full voting rights. What was difficult was to get tenants onto the board, cos they've a legal responsibility. Whereas on the democratic body you have all the power but none of the legal responsibilities so that makes a big difference to people"* (HA5r2, Wales).

Another approach to tenant participation that may be described as being citizenship-oriented is participatory budgeting, which seeks to give tenants (some) control over the decision-making process in relation to how landlords' budgets were spent. One stakeholder noted how participatory budgeting saw a shift in power, with tenants being empowered, taking on responsibilities in doing so: *"We're seeing organisations devolve budgets to tenants. Now, that's empowerment. That's real ceding of power. That is really saying: 'We trust you to spend this pot of money, usually on customer-facing services in a way that you think ...' So that's power. And power brings responsibility. It's a trite phrase, but it's true"* (S4, England).

Participatory budgeting was more prevalent in Scotland than in the rest of the UK. One of the reasons for this, it was reported, is that the Scottish Government has been an advocate of the approach and, reflecting this, has set landlords a target for it: *"Scottish Government has a target for I think one percent of local authority budgets to be decided by participatory budgeting for the next couple of years"* (S2, Scotland).

There was concern about the extent to which tenants were empowered in relation to participatory budgeting. For example, one stakeholder based in England noted how landlords ultimately controlled the budgetary decision-making process, also pointing out that a relatively small proportion of their budgets were spent via the process:

*"To be honest even the ones [landlords] which are really good at engaging residents: it's still on their terms. I mean there was lots of talk about participatory budgeting and stuff like that, which I have never seen come to fruition anywhere ... but in terms of your percentage it's .000 of an organisation's overall budget. It's minuscule amounts of money that they get. And even where they commit to significant levels of engagement ... it's still on the landlord's terms really"* (S1, England).

Another noted that landlord control over the process was inevitable given that they had legal responsibility for budgets. As a result, it was important that parameters of participatory budgeting were articulated to tenants so that their suggestions were "realistic": *"It's not just about saying to tenants: 'Here's some money. And you can have whatever you want.' They need to be realistic and have open conversations with tenants about what's actually achievable and what's not. Tenants need to recognise that there are legal obligations. There are some things they have to do. And there are some things that are nice to do, or that tenants and residents could have more input into"* (S2, Scotland).



Landlords employing approaches that sought to empower tenants invariably thought very carefully about the language they used in relationship to tenant participation. As noted in Chapter Two, they reflected how ‘tenant participation’ should be described. This was the case for HA2 (Scotland) whose definition of the term emphasised the importance of empowering tenants: *“Our definition is about involving tenants in actual decision-making and sharing power with them and having that kind of shared ownership and partnership approach.”* But they also reflected on other language they used. For example, one landlord no longer referred to ‘its’ money but instead talked of *“tenants’ money”*:

*“So what we’re talking about is a big theme for an upcoming strategy ... we’re using words like ‘power’ and ‘control’. We’re using them in the context of how do we give tenants more of it. Because ultimately ... and this may be different from England. But certainly in Scotland, when we talk about money, we talk about “tenants’ money”. In this business, when we talk about money we spend we talk about “tenants’ money”. Because obviously most of it is coming from tenants’ rent and we are highly dismissive of the view that it’s not tenants’ money if it comes via another source, for example Housing Benefit. It’s still their rent. It’s still that. So, we talk about it as “tenants’ money””* (HA2, Scotland).

### **Providing tenants with choice**

A number of landlords highlighted the importance of providing choice in relation to how tenants engaged with the housing service. Doing so is a central tenet of consumerism. However, for our landlords, the desire to offer choice appears to have been driven by a citizenship rationale i.e. extending the reach of tenant participation so that more tenants had an opportunity to engage, including those population groups that, historically, are less likely to do so: *“Choice - I think it’s really important that there’s choice. I think with the digital methods we’re trying to reach a different group of people who are not currently engaged with us and I would like to think we can offer choice through all the different mechanisms”* (HA3, England). It was important that tenants could choose from a range of mechanisms, so that they were more likely to identify an engagement mechanism that was appropriate to their circumstances. HA3 (England) referred to this approach as *“omni-channel. It’s about having the appropriate mechanisms for the people you’re trying to engage with and I know you can see all these staff that say 90% of people now have access to the web. Yeah, I’m sure they do but whether they can use it properly is another matter ... just trying to make sure our approaches are appropriate. We will not be ditching face-to-face. We’re doing more around more variety ... things like pop up consultations”* (EngLA01). Another landlord described this approach as *“pick and mix ... depending on what tenants want to be involved in and what level of commitment”* (LA4, Wales). This issue is revisited in Section 6.4.

### **Tenants’ powers appear to be limited in relation to ‘mainstream’ participation**

Citizenship approaches to tenant participation can be found across the whole of the UK, none more so than in Scotland where community-based (and sometimes community-controlled) housing associations are key housing providers. However, it was reported that - when viewed nationally - tenants’ powers in relation to ‘mainstream’ tenant participation were relatively limited in England. Wales-based respondents felt that, to a lesser extent, the same could be said of the situation in Wales. However, there was also belief that practice was evolving, in a positive way, across the nation as a result of its regulatory framework and the work of its devolved government (and partner agencies).

Many landlords – and local authorities in particular - were reluctant to cede ‘real’ power to tenants, which is the defining characteristic of the traditional approach. In line with Somerville (1998), one tenant activist in England noted that: *“This [tenant participation] is all about power for me”* and tenants outside community-led organisations had relatively little power: *“From my end of things I’m involved with community-led housing where people have power and ultimately for me the issue is what powers do people who live in these homes have. What power have they got to influence and change things? I’m more interested in that than what we actually call it”* (S7, England). Tenants’ powers had declined in recent years, they continued: *“I think very, very limited [power]. Much more limited than it’s ever been . . . Substantially, so yeah [tenant participation] has gone backwards. There are some glimmers and there have been some glimmers over the last two years on the fringes but ultimately what we’re really talking about is the power relationship between landlords and tenants.”* The Social Housing Green Paper (MHCLG, 2018) recognised that the power relationship between landlords and tenants had to be rebalanced, but the tenant activist noted: *“Where the social housing Green Paper talks about rebalancing the relationship between tenants and landlords. That is exactly what is needed and to my mind the government is failing on achieving that end”* (S7, England).

In a similar vein, another stakeholder noted how only a small number of landlords had taken the step(s) necessary to empower their tenants: *“We talked about power. But conferring power on others is going to give a return of benefit to the organisation. But there is a leap of faith there. And I’m not seeing that leap of faith from any organisations at present”* (S1, England). They continued to note that, while there were examples of where tenants had been empowered, these were atypical. *“Perhaps around those organisations that there is a mutual status, that could be the case. Xx [a London based housing organisation] is the most recent one. Some of the co-operatives that are operating this. In Wales, I think xx [the tenant/ employee housing mutual that participated in the study] have been doing some stuff exploring that as well. So there are but as I said they are more outliers to the norm”*. In a similar vein, another stakeholder noted that *“[in England] the majority of landlords are doing very little, both in the HA sector and in the council sector”*, with the view of some Boards and senior leaders being: *“Hang on. We survey residents all the time. We’ve got high satisfaction . . . end of story. That’s enough”* (housing association officer, focus group).

There was a consensus that landlords were reluctant to cede power to tenants. There was also a belief that they wanted to control the participation process, with the process in most landlords being top-down. Both attributes are key hallmarks of a traditional approach to tenant participation. A housing officer noted that landlords controlled scrutiny panels, ‘managing’ tenants’ interaction with them: *“Tenant engagement so far is quite top-down. It’s quite landlord driven. We might have a scrutiny panel. We might invite you to apply to join our scrutiny panel, but we’ll decide how the scrutiny panel interacts with us”* (housing association officer, focus group).

Recognising the deficiencies of this paradigm, the officer continued to note that social housing landlords needed to develop their approaches to engaging with their tenants so that tenant participation was no longer a process controlled by them, with tenants being treated as equal partners. Interestingly, given the long history of tenant participation in this country and the emphasis that historically has been placed on the importance of empowering tenants, they referred to these ideas as being *“progressive”*.

There was a view that landlords controlled all types of tenant participation mechanisms, even those, like participatory budgeting, whose purpose was to empower tenants, as noted earlier. They also controlled newer forms of engagement, with one stakeholder noting that this was particularly the case in relation to digital engagement: *“Especially with the digitisation of engagement, the level of involvement is increasingly set out on the landlord’s terms”* (S1, England).

It was reported that many social housing landlords wanted to 'control the narrative' in relation to tenant participation (and the housing service). One tenant representative also referred to this as "damage limitation": *"There's also an element of damage limitation... and control of the narrative by where tenants' representatives come together in a room called usually by somebody in the employ of the landlord. They have actually quite a lot of control over that narrative. Heaven forefend it should happen without them, which, where you have quite stable communities and long-standing tenants it will. So that is the cynic in me. It's nice to imagine it's all very positive but I have seen an element of damage limitation"* (tenant representative, focus group).

Some landlords appeared to exhibit another attribute that is a feature of the traditional approach: using participation structures, such as scrutiny panels, to regulate their tenants' behaviour. A focus group participant noted how the tenant participation structures put in place by one housing association were more about "pacifying" tenants than giving them any meaningful voice in the housing service. *"I think if you have a cover of engagement opportunities it can act [as] a kind of pacifying force and I think it goes back to what are you trying to achieve from tenant and resident engagement"* (housing association officer, focus group).

This behaviour reflected many landlords' reluctance to engage with their tenants in a meaningful way, noted the same respondent: *"But there are some larger organisations who are cynical and will do things like armchair panels because it's resident engagement and it does avoid them having to actually engage in genuine scrutiny"* (housing association officer, focus group). In a similar vein, a stakeholder noted how the Chief Executive of an English housing association had highlighted how the digitalisation of its housing service meant that it no longer had to speak directly, in person, to its tenants: *"There was a conference I spoke at about two years ago where I was on after a housing association chief exec who shall be nameless and he was talking about digitalisation and in his presentation he actually said at one point 'this means we don't have to talk to our tenants any more'"* (S09PH, England).

The same respondent bemoaned how tenants were "disrespected" by the social housing landlord type that he was most familiar with - housing associations - excluding them from being engaged in any meaningful way: *"I live in a housing xx [tenant led organisation] ... I just compare what goes on in my organisation with what goes on in housing associations. Even the better ones. It's like chalk and cheese. In many cases now we've gone beyond even disrespect for tenants. It's becoming this amorphous body that tenants just feel completely shut out of and they've got no means of engaging with in any way"* (S7, England).

While noting the diversity of local authorities and housing associations, and the dangers of generalising about them, a number of respondents noted how local authorities, in particular, sought to control the participation process and were reluctant to cede power: *"When we talk about social landlords there's such a rich variety in there because local authorities in particular are different from housing associations, and each housing association has its own distinct culture ... where there is genuine, not just tenant participation but tenant control, local authorities in particular resent that bitterly and would prefer to centralise control and power in their own hands"* (tenant representative, focus group).

In a similar vein, a stakeholder noted: *"I find a lot of it [tenant participation] in local authorities] tokenistic"* (S5r1, Wales). He attributed this to cultural factors: *"It's not necessarily the fault of the officers. There are some good officers there but the culture isn't right"* (S5r1, Wales). Another stakeholder highlighted how cultural factors made it difficult for both local authorities and housing associations to empower their tenants: *"I think there's lots of effort to empower tenants but I think it's difficult actually. I think culturally sometimes for organisations it's really difficult. It can involve operating in a really different way than they're used to"* (S8, Wales).

A key cultural factor that stymied the empowerment of local authority tenants was the apparent reluctance of councillors to cede power to them, some of whom (reportedly) felt threatened by tenant participation. A London-based housing association officer noted: *"I work for a housing association but I used to be a councillor so I can see it from both sides. My experience in local government was pushing tenant involvement but actually lots of elected colleagues saying we speak for people thank you very much. And actually councillors feeling quite threatened basically"* (housing association officer, focus group).

He continued to note that a very important consequence of councillors' reluctance to engage with tenants was the paucity of many London boroughs' approaches to tenant participation: *"You can't generalise but I was quite shocked actually how little a lot of the boroughs were doing in terms of tenant participation"* (housing association officer, focus group).

Other factors were behind the reluctance of local authorities to cede power to tenants. By far the most important of these was their governance arrangements which saw Councillors ultimately having legal responsibility for key decisions and for how the housing service was run: *"If I'm honest, overall, then, when you're talking about power - that's very limited especially in a local authority setting when you've got councillors who are responsible at the end of the day for the major decisions"* (LA4, Wales). An English local authority noted how tenants could never be fully empowered for this reason: *"But in terms of the structures of the local authority, I think it's very difficult for tenants ever to have absolute power ... at the end of the day you've got to think about who is accountable for what. And if it's an issue that's ultimately a budget issue then ultimately the members are responsible for the finances of the city council"* (LA3, England).

Because housing associations did not have these democratic obligations, it was easier for them to empower their tenants: *"I think there's much more focus on democratically elected stuff [in local authorities] ... I think they're still there struggling with [it] in the way housing associations aren't"* (S4, England). The stakeholder continued to note that not having to work with councillors was beneficial to housing associations, although in some councils they fulfilled an important role: *"I think the influence of councillors in some local authorities still is very, very useful, but also problematic in a way that housing associations don't have"* (S4, England).

Speaking about the sector as a whole, the same stakeholder felt that it was important that tenants were reminded of the restrictions placed on landlords so that their expectations were realistic in relation to the extent to which they could be empowered: *"So, their powers is an interesting one. But I think it's a false hope. It's never really going to happen. And with the regulatory framework I think most tenants will accept, with the regulatory framework we work in, and particularly around safety stuff. The responsibility has to lie with the landlord. It has to for so many reasons. What the landlord should be doing is valuing tenants' input to that"* (S4, England).

### **Influence not power**

Many landlords distinguished between 'influence' and 'power'. While there was consensus that many providers were reluctant to cede power to their tenants and controlled the tenant participation process, with tenants' powers being limited by this, there was also a belief that tenants had influence and were able to shape decisions in relation to the housing service: *"So they (tenants) are not necessarily making the ultimate decision on some of the big things, but they're shaping the decisions. They're forming the agenda if you like that leads to the decision. And I think that's as important"* (LA3, England). In a similar vein, a Welsh local authority noted that tenants had *"more influence than power"* (LA4, Wales).

It was reported that many tenants did not want power: *"I don't think many are looking for power. I don't think this is about tenants wanting to power-grab"* (S4, England). One reason for this is that with power came responsibility, the same stakeholder noted. Drawing on the example of participatory budgeting, they noted how some tenants did not like being accountable to other tenants: *"Not all tenants are comfortable with that responsibility [devolved budget] because when you're walking around your estate, another tenant is challenging you. It's not always a comfortable place to be"* (S4, England).

It was vital that when tenants were engaged in the decision-making process their involvement was meaningful and they had real influence: *"For me, the defining feature is easy. It's the feedback you get from this [is that] community governance will have a direct impact on decision-making. So, they were of a direct impact. That's a defining feature. When they come in, tenants come in and talk to us and give us feedback. It will have a direct impact on the decisions we make"* (HA2, Scotland).

If tenants did not have demonstrable influence this could deter them from engaging in the future. An officer from LA1 (Scotland) recounted how the failure of councillors to take on board the views of tenants in relation to a proposed rent rise would make it more difficult for them to engage with the tenants in the future: *"They'd just done a rent consultation and I think the tenants had come back saying they wanted a three percent increase which was the middle one I think. But then when it went to the councillors. They still went for the four percent increase. So they didn't take the tenants' responses into account at all. They still went with budget cuts and just said: 'well, we need to go for the four percent'. And I thought this is going to put a lot of tenants off even completing stuff in the future, then. It's going to make it really difficult"* (LA1, Scotland)

## 5. Drivers of changing approaches to tenant participation

### 5.1 Introduction

As noted in the preceding chapters, a number of participants in the research expressed the view that there have been changes over time in tenant participation – both in its prioritisation and the mechanisms through which it takes place. Individuals identified a number of drivers – internally within organisations, and externally in the policy and regulatory contexts – that contributed to shifting approaches to tenant participation. Whilst these are discussed in discrete sections, it is recognised that organisations are impacted by multiple drivers, which may be contradictory.

#### What we know already

- The changing legislative and policy framework has been highlighted as particularly important in facilitating forms of tenant participation and empowerment (Somerville, 1998, Cairncross et al., 1994, Hickman, 2006), but there is divergence across the UK in the framework for tenant participation (McKee, 2011).
- Some organisations have seen participation as largely a matter of meeting their statutory obligations (Reid and Hickman, 2002).
- The regulatory framework in Scotland emphasises safeguarding and promoting the interests of tenants (Serin et al., 2018), whereas in England regulation around ‘consumer’ issues such as tenant involvement and empowerment requires a high threshold for intervention (Bliss et al., 2015).
- Strong leadership to champion the cause of tenant participation, trust, accountability and partnership working has been noted as a critical part of developing organisational cultures that support participation (Pawson et al., 2012, Bliss et al., 2015, Regulatory Board for Wales, 2019, The Democratic Society, 2019, Manzi et al., 2015, Flynn, 2019).

### 5.2 National political and policy contexts

The broad political context, beyond specific policy frameworks, plays an important role in structuring organisational approaches to tenant participation. Whilst housing associations are independent, the perception from some was that *“they follow whatever the government of the day are saying, so if there’s leadership from government, then things start”* (S7, England). In England, for example, whilst major events such as the Grenfell Tower fire have led to renewed calls for tenant voices to be at the heart of decision-making, some have expressed concern that action seems to be waning. Reflecting on the domestic political field one stakeholder noted that, *“this week has made me nervous again, how quickly the regulatory stuff moves away and doesn’t come to fruition ... it will be hard again to keep engagement on the agenda”* (S4, England). They recognised that a new government *“could climb back on the regulatory change”* (S4, England). Others expressed similar concerns about the fluctuating political environment and changes in political leadership around housing issues:

*"When the process started with the Social Housing Green Paper, there were all these roadshows ... there was a real buzz about all of that, real anticipation of change ... some great ideas being talked about ... Then we got Dominic Raab and he turned it into some weird consumer thing ... So then we had the idea of league tables ... then with the current minister, I think he's very traditional ... doesn't really understand the need for tenant involvement" (S7, England).*

By contrast, *"it's quite a different political system in Scotland than England, so a Scottish Government view on this type of thing would be quite different ... the Scottish Government ... has definitely put their money where their mouth is"* (HA2, Scotland). As well as different national contexts, one participant highlighted the history of *"how many of the MPs, councillors up there were all social housing tenants, so they understand social housing in a way that our policymakers don't"* (S4, England).

Two key policy areas were seen as having indirect impacts on tenant participation. Particularly in England, the Rent Reduction – implemented as part of the Welfare Reform and Work Act 2016 – reduced housing association rents by 1% per year from 2016-2020. This was seen as having a significant impact in some organisations; the lack of prioritisation of tenant participation *"was so evident in the Rent Reduction programme ... just get rid of it"* (S7, England). Participants from housing providers also noted that across the sector, *"the first thing that went was their tenant participation ... so that's been very damaging"* (landlord, focus group). Others had retained support for some functions, such as service improvement groups, but had *"cut a community services team that were doing lots of activities in neighbourhoods, engaging with tenants around neighbourhood issues"* (S8, Wales). Tenant participation services were seen as easy targets, and: *"... invariably tenant involvement and empowerment teams and the kind of the structures that they were supporting were the things which were at the top of the list, that got cut. That's a reflection of shifting the priorities, the priorities being around development of new homes, and increased efficiency"* (S1, England).

It was also perceived as being about the *"sheer necessity in terms of 'that's all we can get our hands on quickly'"* because *"it's discretionary, it's not allocated over thirty years"* (HA2, Scotland). Whilst, for many tenants, the Rent Reduction made *"no difference in their pockets ... the very involved tenants quickly saw the impact it had on involvement, and the longer-term damage"* (S4, England).

Whilst rents are due to rise again from 2020, participants were sceptical about whether this renewed income would be invested into the services that had been reduced. In part, it may respond to other government policy drivers, for example, the Social Housing Green Paper (MHCLG, 2018) in which *"there's much more of an appetite to move towards [tenant participation] again, so hopefully it's going to start encouraging associations to ... start investing in that again"* (housing officer, focus group). However, another stakeholder noted that *"I don't think it will ever get back to what it was before"*, but *"there will be a massive expectation on the landlords to deliver better engagement, better services"* once rents began to rise again (S4, England). This may challenge the dominant focus on new development: *"All of the announcements about rent settlement for increased levels of income for the sector have been explained and calculated [as] 'we will be able to develop x number of new homes'. I've never once seen it to say: 'This means that we will be able to speak with and engage more effectively with our tenants'"* (S1, England).

Whilst the Rent Reduction policy was highlighted as having the most significant impact on participation, individuals also noted the role of the welfare reform agenda. One consequence had been that organisations were: *"... using more frontline resource to get out and about, face-to-face with tenants ... one of the important things they might do is use that initial engagement about something that impacts on them personally as a way to start to build up the trust and the engagement interest that's essential for tenant participation to work across the organisation"* (S8, Wales).

Tenant participation staff highlighted opportunities to engage directly with communities by joining up with “our Welfare Benefits Officer ... so they come out with me and we’ll go to the different area offices”, or income team “drop-ins ... I’ve asked to go along too because that’s quite a good thing that they’re doing. It’s actually tenant participation” (HA1, Scotland). The “risk of ... Universal Credit and the changes to income and expectation” meant that “it’s important for everyone to realise that tenant participation ... [is] everyone’s job ... it comes down to the culture and ... every single person working for the landlord knows that the tenant’s voice has to be central to what they’re doing” (S3, Scotland). Another local authority noted that they had “set up additional services and teams” which were “doing a lot more engagement, hand-holding, assistance-type work” (LA3, England). This interacted with welfare services, but they argued that it was not necessarily “being driven by welfare reform ... it should be endemic to the whole organisation regardless. If we were living in great times ... I’d still want to make sure we were pushing ahead” (LA3, England).

### 5.3 The regulatory context

The regulatory context was identified by participants as an important driver of approaches to tenant participation, but with different outcomes in different national contexts. In England, during “the high point ... the Tenant Services Authority ... there was some good work being done ... to raise the bar ... Even in the very worst, it was making them have to at least think about it a bit, not necessarily spectacular results at that end, but it was doing something” (S7, England). With the disbanding of the Tenant Services Authority and the move to “a regulator that was hands-off around consumer regulations ... there was a decline in engagement, without a doubt ... there was no regulatory or policy driver for it” (S4, England).

Since then, “the regulatory focus on economic issues is a real barrier ... because organisations ... are on a treadmill of doing what everybody else is doing, because then they don’t put their head above the parapet” (S1, England). The dominance of regulation around economic standards, and the high threshold for intervention on the grounds of consumer issues, resulted in less focus on the voices and experiences of tenants. However, there was also concern in relation to contemporary discussions around “strengthening the consumer side of the regulations ... I’m just uncomfortable with that starting premise, ‘cos it does go against the idea of an eclectic voice over rights. It’s a different sort of approach” (stakeholder, focus group).

In Wales, “the regulators are stressing [tenant involvement is] more important” (S5r1, Wales). This included a growing role for Boards to understand how tenants had been involved in decisions: “I think that focus on Board assurance feels really important ... and something the regulator’s very hot on at the moment” (S8, Wales). Others emphasised the importance not just of outcomes, but also the atmosphere of involvement, with “the regulatory board ... saying ... maybe it’s not always about having a distinct outcome. It’s about ... those relationships and having that trust” (LA4, Wales).

Similarly, many participants in Scotland highlighted the role of regulation in promoting tenant-focused activities and extending approaches to participation. This was evidenced by things such as “rigorous self-assessment” (S2, Scotland), to demonstrate compliance with the Scottish Social Housing Charter. As one stakeholder noted:

*“The requirement to make sure that there is a tenant satisfaction survey ... [has] been a big shift, because although a lot of landlords would probably do it anyway and it’s part of good practice, that repositioned it as a really important function for the regulators ... It kind of also repositioned levels in tenant participation because I think over time it might have lost some value ... Perhaps over time, as changes in the organisational culture have taken place, it could have been less important whereas this is good, the regulator re-introducing that ... It has been a good movement towards making sure that the tenants’ voices are put back to where they ought to be”* (S3, Scotland).



Whilst there were some who noted the role of a strong regulatory framework in underlining the significance of tenant participation, others argued that this was not the critical factor in driving their approach:

*"It's not a reason for us doing it, because we were doing it anyway ... if they were to remove all that apparatus tomorrow, we would still do it ... [The regulator] is extremely tenant focused and I think that's fantastic ... you'll hear ad nauseam from the regulator about, their role is to protect tenants' interests. And believe me ... they have real conviction about that in Scotland, a real conviction about 'this is about tenants' ... If you look ... at the number of interventions that have happened in Scotland versus England, and look at how tough the regulator has been, every single time the rationale is: tenants' interest. And the regulator is very strong with that, very strong"* (HA2, Scotland).

For tenants the regulator could also be significant, because of a sense that *"the tenant's voice is key ... tenants are central"* – in a meaningful and practical way – because *"in Scotland still tenants can raise issues directly with the regulator if they feel like their voices haven't been heard within the executive committee or the Board. They have a very direct route to their regulator"* (S3, Scotland). This was *"certainly a message that the regulator likes to share regularly, that tenants are welcome to go directly there, so I think it does put the tenant's voice right at the heart"* (S3, Scotland).

However, there was also acknowledgement that *"clearly the English regulator's dealing with a much bigger geographic area, a much bigger stock profile"* than in Scotland (HA2, Scotland). It was also noted that – whilst valuable – regulation was probably not the key to effective involvement. As one stakeholder argued: *"Do I think just having that regulator ... means all tenants up there are getting a far better deal? No, I don't think it does. However, it does concentrate the mind of all organisations that they have to involve and have a strategy, and that helps"* (S4, England). In a similar way, others warned about relying on regulation to drive approaches to participation: *"All the hoo-ha arising out of the green paper and potential regulation means there's an increased national interest from any organisations looking at tenant participation ... I hope they're doing that for the right reasons because they value what they're getting told and not just because they're worrying about the stick of the regulator"* (LA3, England).

The next section considers in more depth the ways in which tenant voices are valued and embedded through the cultures of housing providers.

## 5.4 Leadership and organisational culture

Organisational culture was seen as an important driver of approaches to participation. This was *"not about regulation, this is about 'how do you invoke cultural change' ... if the Board and the senior staff are leading that cultural change process, then you can get rid of staff who've got bad attitudes ... or get people to change their views"* (S7, England). For some, therefore, aside from the regulatory backdrop, there were important *"personal, ethical, and moral factors about the belief of the organisation, about the importance of something, the validity of that, and actually being prepared to stand up and have those arguments ... about: 'This is the right thing to do'"* (LA3, England). One organisation emphasised that involving tenants in decision-making has *"always been important ... it's one of our driving forces and ... certainly under this Chief Executive it got a little bit stronger ... It was strong before that, but he's turned it up a notch"* (HA2, Scotland).

The role of senior leadership in driving a tenant focus was emphasised by a number of participants. In: *"...the organisations that do it really well it does come right from the top, so it's got to be from the Chief Executive downwards, so that every part of the business does have to think 'well what does this mean for tenants, and how would I make it better for tenants?' ... When you have got that in place then it's easy for everyone to adopt that mind-set"* (S3, Scotland). In a similar vein, another stakeholder noted: *"[Tenant participation should] not be a tick box [exercise]. It has to be valued and in the DNA and culture that you referred to, coming from the top down, from the chief executive to directors"* (housing officer, focus group).

One participant described their Chief Executive as *“absolutely fanatical and religious about tenants ... about tenants being happy, and what we’re doing for tenants, and that’s a massive factor in why we are how we are ... that passion, it really comes through our business”* (HA2, Scotland). One way of embedding that focus was to *“go and speak to tenants about the housing officer as part of their appraisal”*, meaning that tenants *“have an input in that”* (HA2, Scotland). Another participant discussed a renewed focus on *“engagement with tenant views”* at one organisation because *“they’ve had a change of Chief Exec, Senior Management, that made it an option”* (S5r1, Wales). By ‘mainstreaming’ that tenant focus, *“you ... make [staff] feel like it’s part of their job and it’s just the way that you do things round here ... and that’s part of the cultural change programme”* for some organisations (S8, Wales). It could also help to create a context in which *“everybody buys into tenant participation”* (HA1, Scotland), empowering *“officers ... to do new things” and be “open to new ideas”* (S5r1, Wales).

This highlights the importance of looking beyond the structures that may exist for participation, because whilst there may be long-standing mechanisms for participation, this does not guarantee efficacy or power. There were cases in which: *“... everybody is complicit in keeping it to a certain level, look as if you’re challenging, but really the element of challenge went a long time ago ... We challenge culture all the time ... it has to come from the top. It has to be a culture. Led from the Board and the Chief Exec that says: ‘we value tenants’ feedback and improvement. It’s how we do business”* (S4, England).

Whilst a view that engagement is ‘the right thing to do’ may generally be seen as positive, there was also a danger of *“just going through the motions ... Rather than it’s something that is going to change the organisation ... that sense of ‘this is a key driver of our future direction”* (LA3, England). However, the difficulties of culture change were noted, with some evidence that local authorities were more locked into *“strategies that don’t deviate ... there’s none of that, you know what, this isn’t working, shall we just do something different next month?” It’s turning the tanker around”* (S5r1, Wales).

Leadership also comes from the Board. Whilst recognising that *“landlords are ... heterogeneous”* (S1, England), it was also noted that changes in the composition of housing association Boards and reliance on private finance was impacting on governance: *“... that shift to non-traditional finance ... has been significant, and ... there is no coincidence that there’s that movement towards bond-related finance, and increased consumer approaches, increased levels of skills-based Boards, and the lessening of the influence of tenants on that decision-making process”* (S1, England).

Whilst the professionalisation of Boards was viewed as a necessary safeguard, to *“make sure that Boards are professional”*, there was also a need for *“that balance, and ... not losing some of that tenant/resident insight”* (S2, Scotland). Discussing *“the complexities of the different financial products”* it was argued that *“if you can’t break it down and explain it to an intelligent non-specialist then maybe we shouldn’t be doing it”* (S3, Scotland). Some organisations had separated out different functions, with a *“traditional Board that does the financial strategy and regulation ... and ... the democratic body made up of members of the organisation”, which enabled tenants to “be representative” and be “advocates and champions”* (S8, Wales).

## 5.5 Changing tenant profile

The changing demographic of the tenant population was a driver of changing approaches for some landlords, acting in combination with the digitalisation of society more broadly. One housing association noted a shift from:

*"... predominantly old, Scottish, white families. That has ... diversified quite significantly ... often ... people coming into these tenancies are younger, young families ... What we've been alert to is the change in society more generally, so the changing make-up of society, and they really want to do things and they're different ... We don't want to wait until it happens and then go: 'Why is nobody doing surveys or why is nobody coming in and giving us feedback?' We can see this coming ... Also ... technology is much more advanced than it was many years ago"* (HA2, Scotland).

In this organisation, mechanisms for involvement in governance had expanded, but *"that's more to reflect the changes in our tenant base rather than a change of focus"* (HA2, Scotland). Similarly, stakeholders reflected that *"it's part of an evolving picture ... the change in demographics and how people live their lives, a lot of us live a lot of our lives online and in the digital space ... It is how they actually communicate, so if you didn't engage with the digital you would be missing out"* (S3, Scotland). This did not mean replacing *"face-to-face interaction and people coming together ... but if you're not getting the people interested in the first instance then ... when it comes to succession planning when your 80 year-old Board members retire, there will be nobody there to pick up their place"* (S3, Scotland).

It is also important to recognise that tenants were themselves organising using mainstream digital channels, as part of a more natural evolution that did not depend on landlord-maintained digital structures. As one participant noted: *"... while we've really struggled to get residents to use our official online forum, what is really clear when you go out and talk to residents is they say: 'We've got a Facebook group for the block. We've got a WhatsApp group for our bit of the estate'. So actually residents are using ... mainstream digital tools ... they are saying: 'Have you got this problem as well? Shall we all speak to the housing officer?'"* (stakeholder, focus group).

One of the issues for landlords in responding to their changing population is therefore to understand the less formal mechanisms for influence that are being developed outside landlord structures.

## 6. Challenges faced by landlords

### 6.1 Introduction

A number of challenges were discussed by participants, largely falling into four areas. The first was to embed a focus on participation within organisations, to ensure that involving tenants in decision-making was not seen as the responsibility of a specific person or team. Some participants noted that this meant challenging the perceptions of other staff members. Growing participation, ensuring that the tenants who engaged were more representative of the broader tenant base, and overcoming barriers to engagement were also key challenges. There was recognition that not everyone wanted to participate through landlord structures, and also that barriers may relate more to trust and a history of negative experiences, rather than the specific mechanisms for participation. Evaluating the impact of tenant participation activities was the last challenge: many respondents highlighted how difficult it was to measure its social benefits.

#### What we know already

- It is crucial that staff at all levels of the organisation ‘buy-into’ tenant participation (Pawson et al., 2012).
- It can be useful to think of tenant participation as arising from a mind-set through which it is valued, rather than as discrete events or structures (Department for Social Development, 2016): this ensures it is embedded throughout organisations.
- The lack of representativeness of ‘involved’ tenants is often cited as a challenge by housing providers (London Assembly, 2018), who are seeking to reflect the diversity of their tenant base within structures for participation.
- Different ways of engaging with tenants, for example through online and digital platforms, are one way of extending participation to new groups, and those who may face barriers to participating in more formal structures, however there are notes of caution over possible exclusionary impacts (Family Mosaic, 2015, The Democratic Society, 2019, Marsh, 2018).
- Individuals may face a number of barriers to participation, including the mechanisms or structures for participation (The Democratic Society, 2019), perceptions of lack of influence (Ipsos MORI, 2009), institutional atmospheres (Hastie, 2018), or practical issues such as transportation (McKee and Cooper, 2008).

### 6.2 Staff perceptions and embedding tenant participation

As noted in Chapter Four, many landlords adopted a ‘functional’ approach to tenant participation and had specialist participation officers and teams, which was seen in both positive and negative terms. Whilst this avoided the complications of generic approaches in which individuals were *“trying to get people to join groups ... but the next day ... talking about rent arrears”*, specialising could also be *“really difficult, because the staff see that as my role and they don’t see it as their role ... it’s something that should really involve everybody”* (LA1, Scotland). In a similar vein, an English local authority noted:

*"We have a tenant participation team. But I guess the down side of that is it can be seen as a particular function of a housing service rather than the function of everybody to be listening to tenants and leaseholders ... That's a potential down side. That people see it as a discrete function when really you want to ensure that feedback from customers is embedded across the whole organisation ... When you've got a discrete team that works in that way it's easy for everybody else to think that that's their job, just as if you've got an asset management team, noticing the drainpipe's leaking becomes the responsibility not of the area housing officer but ... it's that type of issue. Once you've got a discrete function it can be seen by some as not being the function of all, which I think it is"* (LA3, England).

A number of stakeholders believed that responsibility for tenant engagement should not be confined to a tenant participation team. For example, S5r1 noted: *"There are people in every organisation. That's not a problem. But it's the mainstream [that is important]. This is what xx [a stakeholder] talks about. That [tenant participation] shouldn't be the responsibility of one or two people"*. Another stakeholder felt that the adoption of a 'functional' approach by most landlords had been problematic for the social housing sector as a whole: *"I think part of where the sector got itself into a cul-de-sac was saying tenant involvement is a function. And it's not. It's a way of doing business. I think that's the difference we're trying to push to say. It just has to be how you do business"* (S4, England).

S11 (England) also advocated an embedded approach to tenant involvement, noting that when seeking to embed participation structures, landlords should not be 'distracted' by structures: *"It's also about ensuring that the involvement of tenants is central to everything that landlords do...that is, embedded... It's about not getting too fixated on structures...it [effective tenant participation] is more than just structures"*.

For organisations that espoused the virtues of an embedded approach, tenant participation was not a function but a way of working - a culture - that should be inculcated across the housing service. A good example of this was LA3 (England), which, in addition to having put in place a number of engagement structures, had sought to embed tenant participation and a culture of 'listening': *"For me it [tenant participation] is mainly about - well the whole issue about engagement is about - culture. It's about embedding that sense of being a listening organisation and a customer-driven organisation"* (LA3, England).

It is *"important that all staff ... can make sure that they're reiterating to tenants that they do have a voice and encourage them to use it ... We want [staff] to be clear about what tenant participation is ... so we do regular briefings with them"* (LA2, Scotland). Whilst generic roles may achieve 'more buy-in' from staff, there was also a perception that: *"...if you didn't have somebody dedicated, pushing it along, it ... becomes nobody's job ... It then becomes quite unfocused. And then that's when I think it does just become engagement with no real decision-making there ... You are being seen to put something on but it's not really ... giving them [tenants] any power"* (LA2, Scotland).

Encountering regressive attitudes towards tenants and their participation was an issue highlighted by a number of individuals. In addition to working externally to facilitate tenant participation, in some cases staff also had to work internally within organisations to *"change that mind-set"* such as individuals *"saying: 'Oh, you don't want them in your group because he's got rent arrears' ... I thought: 'You can't have an open day and then stop people at the door and say: 'Just a minute; I want to check your rent account'"* (LA1, Scotland). Another individual noted that:

*"Tenant participation in this society ... is about staff at differing levels within these organisations and their attitudes towards social housing tenants ... there's probably far too many staff who have perceptions of people who live in social housing are just ... 'why do I have to deal with this person? This person doesn't know anything. This person is on the make, is going to try and trick me to get something' ... There are some brilliant people out there. But I think there's far too many people with really bad attitudes. People who are housed in social housing are just seen as being dirt by some people"* (S7, England).

One participant likened it to *“a bit of a roller coaster. . . it’s up and down, and sometimes you think you’re making progress and then it all just goes pear-shaped... sometimes officers will then come out with something and you just think: ‘My God, how do you think that?’”* (LA2, Scotland). Embedding a culture of engagement could be facilitated by things like smaller patch sizes for frontline officers to *“engage in building relationships”*, and whilst *“it’s absolutely fundamental to everyone’s job . . . it’s fully embedded across the business . . . If you’re a managing director of a business and you get judged on satisfaction more than anything else, it tends to help embed it”* (HA2, Scotland). In some cases, it required *“cultural change . . . right across the organisation”* (S8, Wales). It may also mean recruiting staff to the organisation that were customer focused, as argued by one landlord: *“That wider issue of organisational culture . . . so you’re recruiting people who have those social skills. You’re trying to get people who are customer service orientated into your organisation. You’re promoting those skills and individuals along those lines. You’re valuing that as well as the technical skills that you require”* (LA3, England).

## 6.3 Representativeness and growing participation

The most common challenge noted by participants was *“that ability to attract new people”* (S4, England). This was not *“a new challenge . . . that is an ongoing issue, and it is probably just about . . . making sure that it’s interesting”* (LA2, Scotland) and to *“get out there into some communities and talk to people”* (HA3, England). Participants noted that:

*“ . . . lots of tenant groups that are quite small in number, largely self-selected, hard-working but not necessarily representative of the wider tenant body. And I’ve spoken to lots of landlords and everyone’s talked about that picture. There will be exceptions to that, but that’s a very strong picture. And people with a sense of: ‘It’s too hard to do anything to change that so we just work with what we’ve got and that’ll have to be good enough’. I’m not decrying the people who put the effort into that because I’m always amazed at the amount of time people put in. But they tend to be unrepresentative and largely self-selecting”* (stakeholder, focus group).

The concern was to get:

*“ . . . beyond that regular group of people that will engage, who are probably older, sometimes quite outspoken, and getting to the people who wouldn’t necessarily always participate, or whose first language is not English, or maybe they’re working and they can’t come to formal events during the day . . . Getting beyond that core group that are always heard . . . not to say that their contribution isn’t valid. It’s great that they’re giving up their time. And they’re contributing to the communities and places where they live. But how do we get beyond them and speak to different people?”* (S2, Scotland).

This was particularly a concern in relation to organisational governance, and a desirability *“to have diversity and you want to have different and new ideas in the organisation”* (S3, Scotland). This required *“succession planning and making sure that people are coming through”* (S3, Scotland). For organisations that had noted a significant change in the demographic make-up of their tenant base, this was *“the biggest challenge”*, for approaches to *“evolve to match the changes in our tenant base”* (HA2, Scotland).

Many participants noted that engaging tenants, and keeping them engaged, with different mechanisms for participation was a key challenge. Whilst *“we don’t live in a world where everyone wants to go long-term. . . the reality is engagement has to be a long-term thing”*, partly, in order to foster trust between landlords and tenants and build tenants’ confidence so that they wanted to be involved in decision-making (S4, England). It should also focus on *“the widest possible population. . . making sure that you’re going to all the different communities”* (S3, Scotland).

This was balanced by an acknowledgement that not everyone would want to participate, and that the ‘problem’ lay more with the forms of participation on offer, which did not necessarily have wide appeal. For example, *“some people thought they were hard to reach without understanding . . . maybe you’re not doing things right to make it attractive for them”* (S3, Scotland). Organisations were considering *“how we manage to make things attractive to people to be involved if they want to”* (LA4, Wales). One idea was to focus on thinking about:

*"... how would we invest in community to support grassroots tenant organisation which we then meet with as equals in a model of housing provision in partnership with our tenants? And that's quite a progressive idea but that is only where the sector is thinking about going and that would be a truer model of tenant participation, if you thought about what you need to do with the grassroots to inspire the resident voice rather than inviting the resident voice" (stakeholder, focus group).*

There was a challenge to "switch the mentality" in some organisations, who thought: *"They [tenants] should be bloody grateful that I've asked them to turn up and give their views' ... No. You should be grateful that they're coming out to do that" (S4, England).* One stakeholder recalled that: *"I was having a debate with a tenant Board member and they said 'well everyone should be interested in this'. And I went: 'yes, but ... that's like saying ... everyone should be interested in golf'. And they couldn't quite get their head round that ... This is something that is of interest to you. And it's not going to be of interest to everyone" (S3, Scotland).*

The established nature of some groups means that *"tenants coming into it may be quite intimidated"* and *"it's just trying to get that other group of people"* like the new tenant who *"doesn't know about housing"* (LA1, Scotland). Some noted that there were new opportunities because *"we've a new generation coming that is used to being asked for feedback constantly, so I think that will help with more engagement"* (S4, England). This may also reduce the *"long-winded"* nature of some forms of participation (S4, England). However, there is also a danger that through moving to more responsive, market-research consumer mechanisms, participation becomes dominated by service improvement issues, rather than strategic decision-making. This may include organisations shifting to *"rating repairs at the point of contact, rating the call centre ... you should be absorbing tenant views continuously, not necessarily reliant on four pensioners on a panel"* (S5r1, Wales). This can be seen as part of *"a broad push towards a consumer-style individual voice, which would be counter to the idea of a collective"* (stakeholder, focus group). Other organisations highlighted challenges arising from high levels of satisfaction:

*"... because actually, one of the drivers in the early days is problems ... If you're not happy with something, it drives you to get engaged ... So how do you get people wanting to stay engaged? ... One of the things we're looking at is how we can devolve even more of a budget to tenants ... The biggest risk attached to that is those who shout loudest come in and take over ... The biggest challenge we've got is how good we want to be" (HA2, Scotland).*

This shows the way in which organisations may need to adapt and extend their approaches to participation in order to meet their aims of widening involvement to a broader set of tenants.

## 6.4 Overcoming barriers to participation

From the perspective of housing providers and stakeholders, the skills and capacity of tenants was noted as one barrier to participation, particularly in relation to formal governance structures such as Boards. Typically, this is seen as being overcome through skills-based training. One participant discussed the way in which some tenants had used committees *"as a platform for them to sort out any issues that they have ... and then once they'd done that they would come off the committee; they were using it for their own reason"* (HA1, Scotland). Using committees to resolve specific issues or problems was therefore not seen as a legitimate or desirable form of influence. Whilst *"that isn't such an issue now"*, the organisation also noted that *"a lot of training goes on now for committees"* (HA1, Scotland). This links to broader debates around the distinction between tenants and Board membership. For example, in Scotland with: *"... a strong voluntary Board system ... I think the regulator is trying to do the improved scrutiny and making sure that governance is much stronger, but ... [it] could maybe be putting off some people ... where they'd be putting too much pressure on Boards to have more professional members as opposed to tenant members"* (S2, Scotland).

Whilst tenant training could be seen as having “definitely opened up possibilities for some tenants”, there was also recognition that others “might have been put off by training” (S2, Scotland). This is partly because mandatory training could be seen as de-valuing the skills and experiences of tenants, beyond financial or professional expertise. Through this move to:

*“... skills-based Boards ... I think it’s important for organisations to understand that skills can involve experience ... knowledge and experience does not mean that you have to be a lawyer or an accountant or another professional. It could mean that you have experience of living in social housing, and that experience brings to bear a perspective which is otherwise absent from the decision-making table ... If we’re talking about barriers, if there just aren’t the mechanisms to engage then how can those voices be heard, so there has to be a firm commitment from organisations that there is value in those” (S1, England).*

As one organisation noted, the key issue was the “accessibility of the opportunity” to be involved (S8, Wales). Others highlighted practical barriers, which required organisations to consider: “are you ... set up to maximise engagement and people getting involved?” (HA2, Scotland). Barriers did not mean primarily something that people “can’t do” because of ability or skills, but “structural issues” such as having committees that “meet in the morning, so if you’re young and you work full-time, you fundamentally can’t be a part of it. It’s not a barrier. It’s just structurally, you can’t do it” (HA2, Scotland). Others noted that there was a lack of recognition of the general pressures that individuals faced, so “the people you perhaps would have relied on to come out and do some of your work are not available ... they’re under massive pressures ... Some people can’t eat, they’re not going to come and do the involvement stuff” (S4, England).

Finally, trust was a theme underpinning a lot of discussions, and a number of participants highlighted the centrality of trust between tenants and housing providers: “Trust is a big thing ... and the sector remembering what it’s here for ... engagement should be absolutely integral to what you do” (S4, England). Whilst “you’ve got to have an outcome ... behind that there’s a lot more that goes on in terms of your relationship with your tenants, whether they trust you ... that is as important as any of the outcomes that you’re going to get, ‘cos that has an impact on those outcomes as well” (LA4, Wales). This was particularly the case where organisations were: “... having to have to step back into this again, whether they want to or they don’t, the regulators are going to force them to ... Their challenge will be what went before, and people saying, ‘we got involved last time, nothing changed, why would we do it now?’ I think some organisations will have to have a very honest conversation with themselves” (S4, England).

For example, one participant noted that the “baggage” of past history meant that for “some of our involved tenants ... there was a lack of trust over certain things, and I think they’ve still got that suspicion, whereas ... the newer tenants coming through ... don’t have the same trust issues perhaps” (LA4, Wales). Another participant highlighted that trust had to be “an element of how you engage, that trust that the landlord’s going to do what they say they’ll do, and the motivations behind, that’s ... hard to capture ... but that’s going to be part of designing tenant engagement” (stakeholder, focus group). This was a long-term process, however, recognising “that trust takes time to build back up, so we need to see the evidence of it. We need to get people back out on the ground. It needs to be led by the top” (S4, England). Building trust was also an investment because “people may not wish to or want to become involved with the Board right from the beginning, but if you invest over time then you can build trust and relationships and then it can develop over time” (S3, Scotland). As will be explored in the next chapter, one way that landlords can facilitate the building of trust is by demonstrating the practical impact of tenant participation.



## 6.5. Assessing the impact of tenant participation activities

There was a consensus that relatively few social housing landlords had put in place robust mechanisms for assessing the impact of their tenant participation initiatives. As a result they were unclear about their outcomes; the value for money they provided; and, 'what worked, when and where, and for whom'. This was the case for one of the landlords participating in the study:

*"It [assessing the impact of tenant participation] is a deficit in our organisation and it's one of the things we've highlighted in our strategy that we want to do - to be better at tracking the different engagement mechanisms. Tracking the influence that customers are having. What the outcomes are. What the impact is and considering the value for money aspect as well. The intention is from now to start tracking activity, evaluating the impact and then at the end of the year do a proper impact assessment that will then shape the strategy" (EngLA01).*

There were a number of reasons why most landlords did not effectively evaluate their approach to tenant participation. One was that most did not reflect on how they approached tenant participation and simply did it without much thought: *"Certainly, the housing association sector that are probably not thinking about it enough. They're just kind of doing it because it is a good thing to do and why wouldn't you engage with your service users or tenants" (S010, Wales).*

But there was another reason that contributed to the lack of evaluation of tenant participation activities: the challenge of quantifying (and monetising) some of its more intangible social benefits: *"We've got a number of examples where you can say there is a clear cashable benefit. The vast majority you can't; those social and neighbourhood benefits. You can't monetise those." (EngLA01).* For example, it was very difficult to measure the enhanced feelings of safety in the neighbourhood that could accrue from tenant participation: *"Earlier we were talking about social cohesion. And sometimes the benefit is feeling very safe as you walk through these streets because you know who lives in half these houses cos you've sat in meetings with them or organised a barbecue or whatever and that is a value which is very hard to measure" (tenant representative, focus group).*

## 7. Conclusion

### 7.1 Introduction

This chapter is divided into two sections. The first is concerned with highlighting the key learning for social housing landlords to emerge from this research. Reflecting the exploratory nature of this study, it does not seek to provide ‘good practice’ suggestions because they must be underpinned by more in-depth and rigorous case study work. Instead, attention focuses on highlighting some key principles for effective tenant participation to emerge from the analysis of the empirical data. The second section highlights an agenda for future research on the subject.

### 7.2 Key learning for social housing landlords

#### Tenant participation compacts

Tenants should be involved in determining the approach to tenant participation in their areas, so that it matches their needs. One way that this can be done is through (revisiting the idea of) a ‘tenant participation compact’, which is an agreement drawn-up by landlords and tenants working together, which outlines the scope, remit and form of tenant participation. One landlord (EngLA01) we spoke to had adopted this approach. Its compact outlined: *“The rules that govern all our engagement. How we’re going to do it. When we’re going to do it. To what standards. What tenants can expect of their engagement. How it’s going to be used. It’s also got stuff in about disputes and how we resolve them.”* They continued to note that their tenants had been instrumental in driving the compact process forward: *“It [the compact] was predominantly done by the tenants. We’ve had it for donkeys years. We refreshed it about 18 months ago but the tenants have a working group with a couple of our officers and they’ve just steamed through it. It’s a massive piece of work.”* (LA3, England).

#### The importance of providing a range of engagement options

The approach taken to tenant participation by landlords, ideally, developed in partnership with tenants, should offer tenants a range of ways of engaging. This was seen as being ‘best practice’: *“I think the organisations we would identify as being good practice are those who provide their tenants with a range of opportunities to get involved. Tenants and residents can choose how they would like to get involved. They could choose to get heavily involved or simply attend a meeting or respond to a survey. It’s about providing a raft of opportunities”* (S11, England).

In a similar vein, a housing officer noted that it was important to provide tenants with a “menu” of mechanisms, which should include a range of diverse approaches, including formal and longstanding ones, like TRAs, and newer, innovative methods like mystery shopping exercises: *“It [tenant participation] is providing a menu of structures. Some people may want to get involved at a tenant group where some are happy just to provide feedback to a policy or get involved in a website. Different areas of interest or service provision or mystery shopping or whatever. It doesn’t just have to be a member of a tenants’ residents group but it’s the landlord embracing and showing that there are options or a menu to get involved at different levels”* (housing association officer, focus group).

As these quotes highlight, providing tenants with a range of engagement mechanisms made it more likely that they would identify a mechanism that was compatible with their circumstances and needs and, in particular, the level of commitment (principally in the form of time) that they were prepared to devote to engaging. This resulted in more tenants being involved and tenant participation being more representative of the broader tenant population, with a greater range of voices being heard, which was essential: *“It [tenant participation] has to be diverse in its voices. [It] has a number of ways to engage and participate; different levels of commitment”* (S5r1, Wales). However, synthesizing diverse views gathered through different channels into an understanding of the profile of tenants’ views and aspirations is not straightforward. Landlords need to think carefully about their processes for managing, and responding to, dissenting views and how they reconcile diverse views and manage any conflict that arises.

### **Developing informal, less time intensive engagement mechanisms**

There was a consensus that formal participation structures, and TRAs, in particular, would continue to play an important role going forward. However, there was also a belief that if more tenants were to be engaged, with different voices being heard, then more resource needed to be dedicated to developing informal mechanisms. This was the view of one stakeholder who, while supportive of formal structures, made the case for more informal mechanisms, which allowed tenants to engage more flexibly and were more suited to their lifestyles:

*"That's great [engaging with formal structures] for the tenants that do that, and have the time to do that, and not intimidated by that formal process. But I think there's a recognition, and this is reflected on the work that we do weekly, that it's not right for everyone. And maybe we need to be looking at more informal engagement with tenants, or giving them more options to engage and communicate in different ways which are right for them. So, again, that's not saying that the formal structures that are in place are not useful and they don't have their place. But for people who don't want to engage that way, or don't want to engage over long periods of time or go to a meeting which will take hours of their time in the evening, or when they're at work. We need to make sure there are more flexible ways for participation and engagement. And that's the really core part, the work that we do weekly is looking at different methods" (S2, Scotland).*

Linked to the need for more informality in relation to tenant participation, a number of respondents highlighted how important it was for landlords to engage with tenants in an accessible way, and in doing so demystifying (as much as possible) how the housing service and tenant participation worked.

### **The importance of ensuring that, if tenants want to participate, they are able to influence the decision-making process**

If tenants want to participate, then they should be able to choose how they engage. But choice is redundant and has no value if they are unable to influence how the housing service is run. This point was acknowledged by a stakeholder: *"Having said that, structures are great but it is about making things live. It's about ensuring that tenants have real influence" (S11, England).* It is important that there is *"shared decision-making"* (tenant activist, focus group) with the process being *"a genuine conversation rather than a tokenistic [one]" (S3, Scotland).*

### **Demonstrating the impact of tenant participation**

As noted earlier, it is important that where tenants are involved in the decision-making process they are able to influence it. It is also vital that they can see this, with the impact of their involvement being fed back to them. One stakeholder recognised this: *"Now, if a tenant says: 'Can I make a difference? Can I influence what they're going to do going forward?'... the challenge. . .is how do you get that trust with them that says it's worth coming in? So, if they can't see a cause and effect in terms of they come in: 'We've given you all this feedback - what's happened?'" (ScotHA02).* There was recognition that more work was needed to be done by landlords to demonstrate this 'cause and effect' impact:

*"I think what we've missed so far and is really important is that it's acted on, listened to and change happens and that change is communicated back, which is the classic bit missing for most of these models. Which is actually they do listen but they never tell people back what they did as a result. . .trust is a word that comes up. They'll say 'yeah my landlord has got my views but I'm not sure they did anything about it' or 'I'm not sure what happened as a result' and I think that's the slightly closing the circle. Whatever the phrase you want to use. But we're not good enough at telling people what we did" (S5r1, Wales).*

If the impact of their involvement could be demonstrated to tenants, they would be more likely to engage in the future, it was argued. They would do so because they saw that they had had influence and trusted their landlord, which was identified as being a key issue in the preceding chapter. The above quotes and the following one illustrate this point: *"I don't think it matters what you call it as long as you're building trust with your customers and acting on what's important to them and that you can evidence that you're doing that. So there's a good feedback loop"* (LA3, England). One participant noted that responsibility for feeding back to tenants should not be the sole responsibility of landlords - tenants who participate in governance and scrutiny structures also had a responsibility to do so: *"reporting back to your tenants. ...it's not just the landlords' responsibility"* (S4, England). However, if this is an expectation of tenants it may deter them from taking on these roles, because of the extra demands on their time and enhanced responsibility.

### **Evaluating approaches to tenant participation**

As tenants should be actively involved in decision-making processes, then there should be no need to demonstrate the value of tenant participation. However, notwithstanding the difficulties associated with measuring its impact, it is important that landlords evaluate what they do. They should do so for two reasons. First, in a context where welfare reforms (and Universal Credit, in particular) are having an adverse effect on their finances, demonstrating impact will help them to defend tenant participation budgets. Second, evaluating their activities will allow landlords to develop a better understanding of the impact of different engagement mechanisms. These assessments should not be confined solely to (service) outcomes - they should identify the numerous process benefits that accrue to both tenants and landlords from tenant participation.

### **It is important that tenant participation is a way of working and not just a function**

Creating a tenant participation 'function' within organisations, through the employment of tenant involvement officers and teams, can be an effective way of delivering tenant participation. However, this 'functional' approach is not without its weaknesses, the most important being that it can be a barrier to tenant participation becoming embedded as a way of working across the organisation as a whole. If tenants are to be given meaningful voice, then it is important that tenant participation is mainstreamed, although not at the expense of tenant participation officers and teams. Some of the ways that landlords can seek to promote 'embeddedness' have been considered in Chapter Six. These included changing the patch sizes of front-line staff and recruiting staff who are tenant-oriented and who have good communication skills. Another (complementary) measure is devoting resource to upskilling and training staff in relation to tenant participation.

## 7.3. Further research

As noted in Chapter One, this study is one of five being undertaken by the CaCHE governance team on 'resident voice'. A future project will be concerned with tenant participation and, specifically, how it is theorised. And there are plans for the team to survey UK social housing landlords' about their approaches to tenant participation as part of a broader survey of their practices. Notwithstanding this, reflecting the lack of research into tenant participation in recent years, there are significant gaps in knowledge on the subject. Specifically, research is needed on:

### **i) Exploring the views and experiences of tenants (and residents) in relation to tenant participation. This work should unpack a range of issues including:**

- What are tenants' expectations of tenant participation? And what do they want from it? What do they see as its purpose?
- What are their experiences of tenant participation?
- To what extent do tenants feel that they can influence the decision-making process? And to what extent are they empowered? What 'responsibilities' and powers do they want?

- What are their views on different tenant participation mechanisms, including long-standing ones, like TRAs, and newer ones, like digital platforms?
- What are the barriers and challenges that they face in relation to tenant participation?

In answering these questions, it is important to unpack how tenants' views and experiences differ (or not) in relation to a range of contextual factors including:

- Their demographic characteristics and circumstances.
- Their participation history. When and how have they engaged? How frequently have they done so? Are they still engaged? And, if not, why did their involvement end? It would also be important to explore the views of 'non-joiners': is their lack of involvement the result of barriers or a lack of desire to participate?
- The characteristics of their landlord.
- Their location, nationally, regionally and sub-regionally.

It is also important that research in this area captures tenants' experiences in relation to the

full spectrum of participation 'models', incorporating both 'mainstream' participation and those structures which are concerned with empowering tenants, such as housing mutuals and tenant management organisations.

### **ii) Understanding, mapping and conceptualising approaches to tenant participation in the four nations that make up the UK**

Previous research has highlighted differences in the approaches to tenant participation across the nations of the UK. And, although this study is not a comparative one and relatively small scale, it has also found this to be the case. Research is therefore needed into exploring and mapping the approaches taken by landlords across the UK territories. This should involve national surveys of landlords and in-depth case studies. It is imperative that the views of tenants are captured as part of this work.

### **iii) Evaluating the impact of tenant participation activities**

There has been relatively little research into evaluating the impact of tenant participation and identifying its costs and benefits, although there have been some excellent contributions in the field in recent times (see for example, Manzi et al., 2015). Although, this is a task fraught with challenges, including how to evaluate (and potentially monetise) some of the more abstract and diffuse social benefits of participation, like enhanced confidence and wellbeing, it is important that work is undertaken in this area. As part of this research, attention should focus on highlighting the costs and benefits of differing engagement mechanisms, including 'old' and 'new', formal and informal, and collective and individual.

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# Appendix

Participant descriptions (interviews)

	File code	Descriptor
Stakeholders	S1	English tenant organisation
	S2	Scottish-based housing profession body
	S3	Scottish-based representative body
	S4	English tenant participation organisation
	S5r1	Welsh tenant participation organisation
	S5r2	Welsh tenant participation organisation
	S6	Northern Ireland-based organisation
	S7	English based tenant organisation
	S8	Welsh HA representative body
	S9	English based housing profession body
Housing providers	HA1	Scottish HA, rural, small
	HA2	Scottish HA, large
	HA3	English HA, northern-based, small
	HA4	English HA, SE-based, large
	HA5r1	Welsh tenant and employee mutual HA
	HA5r2	Welsh tenant and employee mutual HA
	LA1	Scottish local authority, central / Scottish tenant participation representative
	LA2	Scottish local authority, western
	LA3	English LA, northern-based, large
	LA 4	Welsh LA
	NI1	NI landlord, large - also key stakeholder

## Participants (focus group)

The focus group comprised 17 participants, five of whom were tenants. The following organisations were represented:

- Social housing landlords
- Tenant and resident groups
- Community-led housing organisations
- Tenant representative bodies
- Government departments
- Tenant participation advice and support bodies
- Social policy and housing lobbying bodies
- Professional bodies