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Understanding Approaches to Tenant Participation in the Private Rented Sector in Northern Ireland:

A Scoping Report

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Executive Summary

In the wake of the Grenfell disaster, tenant participation - how tenants can influence a landlord's activity - has re-emerged as a key policy concern for the UK Government. Its attention has focused on the Social Rented Sector (SRS). However, with more households renting from private landlords, there have been calls for tenant participation to be extended in the Private Rented Sector (PRS), where historically, it has largely been confined to 'bottom-up' activism. This is the context within which the Department for Communities - part of the Northern Ireland Executive - commissioned the UK Collaborative Centre for Housing Evidence (CaCHE) to undertake a (small-scale and exploratory) study into the challenges associated with extending tenant participation in the PRS in Northern Ireland, where almost one fifth of households live in the sector. The study comprised: a 'rapid' literature review; in-depth interviews with representatives of key 'stakeholder' organisations; a 'focus group' with tenants involved in a Northern Ireland-based collective tenant participation structure; and, an interactive 'stakeholder' engagement event.

The key findings of study are:

- In line with the picture elsewhere in the UK, tenants' ability to influence their landlords' activity through engaging with them individually was found to be relatively limited. However, it was reported that many landlords, particularly smaller ones, enjoy excellent relations with their tenants and do engage with them. There are only two collective tenant participation structures in operation in Northern Ireland: Renters' Voice (see below); and, Community Action Tenants' Union (CATU).
- Interviewees recognised the potential benefits for Government, landlords and tenants of extending tenant participation in the PRS. For Government, there was a consensus that involving tenants through collective participation mechanisms would lead to improved policy and decision-making. Tenants would benefit from 'smoother' tenancies, better mental health and greater agency. Landlords would experience a range of benefits including higher increased yields. These would accrue from lower void level as tenants stayed in their homes longer, and less resource being devoted to repairs, as they took better care of their homes, and alerted landlords to problems as soon as they occurred.
- However, there was a consensus that extending tenant participation in the PRS in Northern Ireland would be challenging. A number of barriers were highlighted, including: the absence of a regulatory regime to ensure that landlords engaged with their tenants; tenants being less motivated to participate because they saw their stays in the sector as being temporary; and, the high proportion of small landlords (four fifths of all landlords in Northern Ireland own only one or two properties), many of whom are difficult to engage.
- A number of principles should underpin any strategy to extend tenant participation in the PRS in Northern Ireland. These include: consulting all key stakeholders prior to its development; ensuring that whatever approach is taken to any extension of tenant participation, it is resourced adequately; and, the importance of incentivising landlords to engage with their tenants. Introducing a regulatory framework for tenant participation, albeit, in the first instance, a 'light-touch' one, would be beneficial.
- With regard to the approaches that should be used to engage tenants, attention should initially focus on developing collective ones. There is already an agency led tenant engagement vehicle in place: Renters' Voice. This initiative has a core group of tenants who regularly provide input and feedback on issues of general concern to private tenants and could relatively easily be more formally convened as a PRS Policy Panel (like the Housing Policy Panel already in operation for the SRS). This group could also be upskilled to provide a nucleus of tenant participation 'champions', providing advice, guidance and support, potentially playing a key role in developing other participation mechanisms.

- There is merit in establishing a multi-stakeholder PRS forum(s) with a Northern Ireland-wide remit or focus and / or forums in each of the 11 council areas.
- Councils and community groups could play a key role in identifying tenants who may be willing to participate in collective structures.
- Historically, the most common way of engaging tenants collectively has been through meetings. However, alternative methods, specifically, digital methods, should also be provided. This will make it more likely that tenants will be able to identify an engagement structure 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 participating. This should also help ensure that a greater range of voices are heard.
- Finally, it is important that if tenants choose to participate, they are able to influence the decision-making process in meaningful ways, rather than their involvement being tokenistic.

1. Introduction

The rapid growth of the Private Rented Sector (PRS), both absolutely and in terms of its market share, has been a key common characteristic of the housing markets of advanced economies since the start of the new millennium (Crooke and Kemp, 2014). The trend has been particularly evident in Anglophone countries, including the UK and Ireland (Pawson *et al.*, 2017).

The factors underlying this rapid growth and their relative importance have been thoroughly analysed and debated in the academic literature. A number of common factors have been identified (Hulse and Pawson, 2010; Maclennan and O'Sullivan, 2011; Crook and Kemp, 2014; Wilcox *et al.*, 2018). These include: significant longer-term changes in the structure of labour markets and the pattern of household formation; affordability barriers for first-time buyers; deregulation of financial markets and low interest rates; and the financialisation of housing. The availability of Buy-to-Let mortgages and the associated boom in speculative investment in the PRS; and, Government policy increasingly favouring market solutions to housing issues rather than investment in social housing, are also drivers.

Other factors have contributed to the growth of private renting. These include: the deregulation of the PRS; generous tax relief on rental income and an annual £multi-billion subsidy via Housing Benefit; a growth in student numbers; and, a very significant increase in the number of economic migrants from Eastern Europe following the accession of A8 countries to the EU in 2004.

In Northern Ireland, the same UK-wide financial and policy drivers were at work, but there were, in addition, a number of more specific factors at play. These included: the contribution of the 'Peace Process' (particularly after the 1998 Agreement) that created a more secure environment for investors, including those in the PRS; and, the unprecedented investor boom that was partly fuelled by the 'Celtic Tiger' and in turn led to the fastest year on year house price growth (36% between 2006 and 2007) of any region of the UK (Wilcox, 2008). The redevelopment of brownfield sites, particularly in Belfast, that included a large number of apartments with city centre or water's edge locations and were bought as investment properties (Gray and McAnulty, 2008), mirrored similar regeneration projects in the industrial cities of Great Britain.

Following the Global Financial Crisis 2007/08 and the consequent sharp economic downturn, there was a growing awareness that the PRS would, in the longer-term, continue to provide the only realistic option for many households. This was reflected in policy terms in the Department for Social Development Northern Ireland's (DSDNI) *Facing the Future: Housing Strategy for Northern Ireland* consultation document that had as one of its key aims: "Making the Private Rented Sector a more attractive housing option" (DSDNI, 2012, p16) through the introduction of a landlord registration scheme and a scheme to protect tenancy deposits.¹ *The Housing Strategy for Northern Ireland 2012-2017* published three years later committed the Department for Communities to ensuring the PRS offers "a viable alternative for more households" and "a more attractive housing option for more people" (DSDNI, 2015, p.5). This was followed in 2017 by publication of the consultation document: *Private Rented Sector in Northern Ireland - Proposals for Change*. However, while this addressed a wide range of PRS issues, 'tenant participation' was not one of them.²

'Tenant participation' is a contested concept which covers a range of processes and forms (McKee and Cooper, 2008). However, it may be best understood as how tenants "can influence a... landlord's activity" (Pawson *et al.*, 2012 p.3). 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 terms.

¹The Landlord Registration Scheme Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2014 and The Tenancy Deposits Schemes Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2012 reflected these policy goals.

²<https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/consultations/communities/private-rented-sector-proposals-for-change-consultation.pdf>

Northern Ireland has a long-standing commitment to tenant participation in the Social Rented Sector (SRS), guided, organised and facilitated on an ongoing basis by the Department for Communities, the Northern Ireland Housing Executive (NIHE), the housing associations and Supporting Communities. Recent decades have seen this commitment find its on-going expression in organisational structures such as the Housing Community Network, the Central Housing Forum, which serves as a consultative panel for the Housing Executive, and Supporting Communities' Housing Policy Panel, which acts as a consultative body for the Department for Communities. Regular meetings, forums and consultations organised by NIHE, housing associations, and Supporting Communities, means that tenants in the SRS have an input into housing policy and practice in Northern Ireland. However, such structures and approaches do not exist in the PRS.

The Department of Communities is committed to addressing this issue. This is why it commissioned the Collaborative Centre for Housing Evidence (CaCHE), which has recently undertaken studies of the tenant participation in the private and social rented sectors (Hickman and Preece, 2019; Preece, 2019; Garnham and Rolfe, 2019), to conduct a **(small-scale and exploratory)** study of tenant participation in the PRS in Northern Ireland. The study team were asked to pay special attention to how, potentially, it could be extended in the sector.

Approach to the research

The study comprised the following elements:

- A rapid review of the academic and 'grey' literature on tenant participation in the PRS (especially) and SRS, which paid particular attention to recently published CaCHE reports on tenant participation.
- In-depth interviews with key 'stakeholders'. Eleven in-depth semi-structured interviews were carried out with a range of key informants. Ten of these were UK based, with five being based in Northern Ireland. In order to provide an international perspective, a representative from an international tenants' organisation was also interviewed. Interviewees were selected to provide expertise from a range of key perspectives, but all of them had direct experience of, and an interest in, both the PRS and tenant participation. In addition to private landlords and tenants, included within the interview sample was representation from: the SRS; tenant representative bodies; Government; tenant participation advice and support agencies; and, professional bodies. The interviews were carried out between December 2020 and February 2021. Given the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, they were completed either by phone or using the Zoom virtual platform. Interviews were recorded for the purpose of accuracy and transcribed. Brief information about the 'stakeholder' organisations represented in the interview sample is presented in the Appendix.
- A 'focus group' with core members of an existing collective tenant participation vehicle in Northern Ireland: Renters' Voice.
- An interactive 'stakeholder' engagement session that reviewed the emerging findings and key recommendations of the study.

Structure of the report

The remainder of the report is divided into following sections:

- Existing evidence base. This section highlights the key findings to emerge from the rapid review of the existing literature on tenant participation.
- Interviewees' understandings of tenant participation and the benefits that accrue from it, which is the first of four sections that draws on data garnered from the 'stakeholder' interviews.
- Tenant participation in the PRS in Northern Ireland
- Obstacles to the introduction and extension of tenant participation
- Extending tenant participation in the PRS in Northern Ireland
- Conclusions and recommendations

2. Existing evidence base

Tenant participation has been a long-standing feature of the rental sector in the UK, although it has been much more evident in the Social Rented Sector (SRS) than the Private Rented Sector (PRS). There are a number of reasons for this. These include differences in the modus operandi of landlords - social housing landlords have a social responsibility, whereas private landlords are primarily driven by commercial imperatives. Another factor is the marked differences in the policy and regulatory frameworks of the two sectors: *“there is currently no legislative requirement for PRS landlords to involve tenants in decision-making or service development, contrasting strongly with the legal framework which underpins tenant participation in social housing in each of the nations of the UK”* (Garnham and Rolfe, p.6 ; Preece, 2019).

In the late 1990s/ early 2000s, promoting tenant participation in the SRS was an important policy priority for Government, but it has slipped-down the policy agenda in recent years. The Grenfell fire tragedy, which, many commentators argue, highlighted the lack of influence and power tenants have, has changed all this, and tenant participation is now firmly back as a feature of the policy landscape for the SRS. Furthermore, the tragedy has, to some degree, also focused attention on the rights of private renters and the extent to which they are able to influence the activities of their landlords. Notwithstanding this, tenant participation in the UK is confined largely to ‘bottom-up’ activism, such as tenants’/ renters’ unions, initiated and directed by tenants themselves (Garnham and Rolfe, 2019). This is in contrast to the SRS in the UK, where landlord-initiated tenant participation mechanisms are an ‘everyday’ feature of housing practice, and the PRS’s of a number of continental European Countries, including Germany, Austria, the Netherlands and Sweden, where tenant participation extends well beyond activism (Hulse *et al.*, 2011).

There is a large literature on tenant participation in the UK, although this is largely confined to the SRS (Preece, 2019). However, a recent study by CACHE colleagues, Lisa Garnham and Steve Rolfe, provides an important insight into tenant participation in the PRS in the UK. Their study was concerned primarily with activism - that is *“activity in which tenants come together to collectively tackle a housing problem”* (Garnham and Rolfe, 2019, p6) - it is less concerned with landlord led tenant participation and individual forms of engagement.

The Rolfe and Garnham study is one of very few to examine tenant participation in the PRS in Northern Ireland - one of its four case studies, the Private Tenants Forum, was located there - making this research timely. The Private Tenants Forum was set-up in 2012 by Housing Rights, a charity offering housing advice and advocacy across Northern Ireland’s housing sectors. It ran for three years and was funded by the Oak Foundation. The purpose of the forum was *“was to provide a space in which Private Rented Sector tenants could share their experiences and views and be supported to actively influence housing policy and legislation in Northern Ireland.”* (Garnham and Rolfe, 2019. p17). Typically, forum meetings were attended by between five and ten individuals.

The Forum provided a vehicle to identify sector wide potential solutions to those problems confronting members, all of whom had approached Housing Rights for advice and support. The forum faced a number of challenges including: the difficulty of agreeing priorities for the PRS, given its diversity; and, recruiting and retaining members. Garnham and Role identified a number of positive outcomes to emerge from the initiative including:

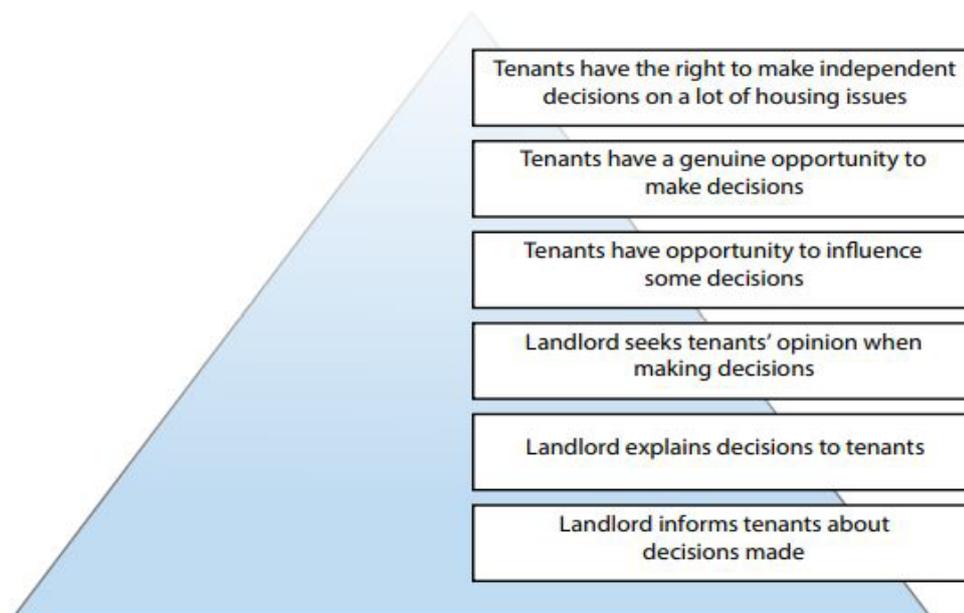
- Tenants reporting that their involvement in the Forum had: enhanced their skills; and, increased their awareness of key issues, legislation, policies, and practices, making them better placed to challenge poor practices in the PRS.
- Research undertaken by the Forum was a catalyst towards Northern Ireland Trading Standards Service discussing improvements to lettings contracts with PRS lettings agencies. Furthermore, information about rights and responsibilities for tenants produced by the Forum was shared across the sector.
- The ‘Agenda for Action in the PRS’ policy briefing written by the Forum had the potential to impact on housing legislation in Northern Ireland.

There has been relatively little research into understanding and conceptualising approaches to tenant participation in recent years, with most of those studies that have been conducted focusing on the SRS. Notwithstanding this, approaches can be framed in a number of ways. For example, a distinction can be made between collective forms of engagement, like tenants'/renters' unions and forums, and individual forms of engagement, which may take a range of different forms, such as a landlord and tenant deciding together the timing of monthly rental payments. Another distinction can be made between landlord/ agency initiated structures, such as tenants' forums, and those initiated by tenants, such as tenants'/ renters' unions. 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.

Whatever approach is taken to tenant participation, it is important to understand the power relationship between landlords and tenants. For tenant participation to be effective and meaningful, it is essential that tenants should be able to exert influence (power) over the decision-making process (Garnham and Rolfe, 2019; Hickman and Preece, 2019). A number of studies, particularly in the SRS, have sought to understand power in relation to tenant participation. Several have drawn on Arnstein's (1969) 'ladder of participation', which although concerned with 'levels' of engagement, is more "a ladder of tenant empowerment: as tenants move up the ladder, they are increasingly able to influence and control their own housing" (Garnham and Rolfe, 2019, p12).

The model has a number of limitations, not least that it assumes that 'levels' further-up the ladder are more desirable (Hickman, 2006; Cahill and Dadvand, 2018), when this may not be case - some tenants may not want control but merely to be informed. However, it does provide a useful basis for understanding the power relationship between landlords and tenants and for conceptualising approaches to tenant participation. Drawing on the work of Ward (1992), Garnham and Rolfe (2019) have helpfully applied the Arnstein ladder to tenant participation, as highlighted in Figure 1.

Fig.1: 'Levels of tenant participation according to H. Ward, compiled by Garnham and Rolfe (2019) on the basis of (Ward 1992, p.153)' in Suszynska (2015)



The most recent nationwide study of tenant participation activity in the SRS, which paid particular attention to the situation in England, Scotland and Wales, was undertaken by Hickman and Preece (2019). It revealed that in relation to 'mainstream' tenant participation activities, much activity undertaken by social housing landlords based in England could be located on the bottom three 'rungs', with very little falling into the top two. To a lesser degree, the same situation exists in Wales. The situation is very different in Scotland where community-based (and sometimes community-controlled) housing associations are a key feature of the Scottish housing system.

The Hickman and Preece (2019) study provides only a limited insight into tenant participation in Northern Ireland. However, a much more detailed account is provided by Mullins *et al.* (2017), albeit with specific reference to one aspect of tenant participation: tenant involvement in the governance of social housing. The study examined governance models across Northern Ireland, drawing-on four case studies to do so, and highlighted the potential for "*adaptation and adoption*" (ibid. p4) in Northern Ireland of four models from across Europe.

If tenant participation is to be extended in the PRS, it is essential that landlords 'buy-into' the concept. One way to do this is to highlight the benefits that accrue from it, particularly for landlords. While the issue has not been systematically addressed by research into tenant participation in the PRS, a number of studies have addressed it in the context of the SRS (Hickman *et al.*, 2019; Manzi *et al.*, 2015; Cole *et al.*, 1999). These studies identified a number of potential commercial benefits to landlords to accrue from tenant participation: an improved service to tenants; improved decision-making; and, resources being utilised more effectively. Involving tenants potentially prevented 'over-serving' - i.e. allocating too much resource to an area of the housing service (Hickman and Preece, 2019). Preventing 'over-serving' and better decision-making resulted in cost efficiencies.

Previous research, particularly in the context of the SRS, has highlighted a number of obstacles to the extension of tenant participation (Hickman and Preece, 2019). These include the reluctance of landlords to embrace the concept; the reluctance of many tenants to engage; the 'unrepresentative' nature of those tenants who do engage; and, insufficient resources to fund activities (Hickman and Preece, 2019). Another potential barrier to the extension of tenant participation has been highlighted by the broader literature on the PRS: the "*power imbalance at the heart of the tenant-landlord relationship*" (McKee *et al.* 2020, p1476), which results in tenants feeling powerless.

3. Interviewees' understanding of 'tenant participation' and the benefits that accrue from it

Understandings of 'tenant participation' varied. Some interviewees recognised that 'participation' took many forms and could occur at different 'levels'. One respondent noted that *"a lot of things that come under the label of tenant participation aren't tenant participation at all. They are just tenants being informed or consulted ... despite the fact that there has been a lot of money and resources invested in it"* (S3). The same respondent continued to observe that tenant participation is *"about having a stake in the decision"*. In a similar vein, L3 noted that tenant participation was not *"about tenants asserting their rights"* but providing an *"opportunity for tenants to participate in decisions relating to the provision of their accommodation... [encouraging] open dialogue between landlords and tenants"* (L3).

The conceptualisation of tenant participation as a vehicle for providing tenants with influence was embraced by S6 who saw its key role as being a sounding-board for policy development: *"It's very important that there is a group of private tenants who we can reach out to and get their views, their experiences of living in the sector, so that it can inform our policy"* (S6).

One respondent's (S4) understanding of tenant participation was informed by Arnstein's ladder of participation. They distinguished between *"participation"* and *"empowerment"*: *"I try and sometimes change it around about tenant engagement; tenant participation... where on the ladder ... participation is actually in the bottom rungs of the ladder... whereas 'residents' empowerment' [is higher]."*

Interviewees reported that a number of benefits accrued from tenant participation. They accrued for Government, tenants and landlords. For Government involving tenants through collective participation mechanisms resulted in better decision-making at the (sub) regional and national levels. This was the view of a representative of a landlord representative body: *"At the macro level, you get much better policy making... You get better informed and more balanced policy"* (L1). In a similar vein, S3 noted: *"Very obvious benefits [accrue from tenant participation] in terms of the development of policy in relation to the Private Rented Sector, huge benefits... then it doesn't matter if you share the same landlord or not if you share the same issues ... potential for genuine impact at a policy and legislative level ... difficult to see how operationally it could work... but it might facilitate better practice or better understanding."*

S2 noted there was a lack of evidence on whether providing tenants' influence resulted in benefits to them and, in particular, an improvement in their housing circumstances: *"The NRLA [National Residential Landlords Association] is encouraging landlords to give tenants choice with regard to adaptations. Research has been published on this. The research was also designed for renter... we have made the assumption that giving tenants voice will improve their housing situations, but we don't know if it does."* Notwithstanding this, there was a widespread belief that tenant participation did bring benefits to tenants. For example, it resulted in their tenancies being more likely to be 'trouble-free': *"The potential benefits could be a smoother tenancy, where both sides understand each other and know where they stand, provided the expectations on both sides are realistic and considerate of each other"* (L3). It also resulted in *"better mental health for tenants"* (T1) and *tenants having greater agency and feeling more empowered.*

Involving tenants resulted in financial benefits for landlords, reported a number of respondents, with *"the[ir] business[es] being run better"* (L1). This was because a number of commercial gains for landlords accrued from tenant participation. For example, it resulted in low levels of turnover: *"All landlords want their tenancies to last as long as possible - engaging with tenants mean that this is more likely to happen"* (S2). In a similar vein, T2 noted: *"Tenants are not unhappy [when they are engaged]. As a result, you get lower turnover. This results in more level rental income"* (T2). And L2 noted: *"As I said before, the thing that kills landlords is high churn and voids. Engaging with tenants and creating a community means that they are likely to stay longer."*

Engaging their tenants also meant that landlords devoted less resource to undertaking repairs. This worked in two ways. First, involving tenants made them more likely to look after their homes because it improved their mental health: *"This [tenant participation] is good for landlords as if tenants have good mental health they will be more likely to look after their homes. If landlords talk properly with tenants and engage with them, then they are more likely to look after their homes. They're more likely to think: 'hang-on: I need to think about what I'm doing in the house'. Good engagement also means that landlords are more likely to stop repairs getting too big - they're nipped in the bud before they get serious"* (T1).

As highlighted in the last quote, engaging tenants meant that they were also more likely to report repairs at the earliest opportunity, meaning that minor repairs did not escalate into bigger ones, with obvious cost benefits for landlords: *"From the landlords' perspective, engaging with tenants means that repairs don't escalate and turn into bigger issues"* (S2). L1 also noted: *"By having conversations with their tenants, landlords can identify problems before things start to go wrong."*

Tenant participation also brought other repairs related benefits to landlords. A representative of a national landlord representative body noted that it was *"better for doing repairs as landlords know when tenants will be in"* (L2), while another noted that *"it ensures that they are not doing their own thing [i.e. improving/repairing their homes]"* (S2).

4. Tenant participation in the PRS in Northern Ireland

Respondents were asked how prevalent tenant participation was across Northern Ireland at both the individual and collective levels.

Individual participation

In line with the picture elsewhere in the UK, tenants' ability to influence their landlords' activity through engaging with them *individually* was found to be relatively limited and restricted to the lower 'rungs' of Arnstein's ladder of participation. However, it was reported that many landlords, particularly smaller ones, enjoy excellent relations with their tenants and do engage with them. L3 noted that much of this activity went 'below-the-radar' and was not formally badged as 'tenant participation':

"Smaller operators will be practicing those [tenant participation] principles, anyway, without a formal programme. . . They are not calling it 'participation'. But if you are on a phone call with your tenant about something that is concerning them or is concerning you, you are very much involving your tenant in sorting out what is happening. There isn't some other process that someone else has developed that you are blindly following. It's all very flexible and organic. If you are dealing with one tenant in your house and there is something that needs to be sorted out. . . you can't get much better participation than that. They can say exactly what they want and you can say what you want. So, in that respect, it already exists. But just not under that name [tenant participation]. There is no formalised process. . . you don't need those things. You know how to deal with it because it is on such a small, more personal scale. So, I think, participation already exists on that small-scale. It's just not called that [tenant participation]. It's just people communicating with each other."

Collective participation

Like the rest of the UK, there was a consensus amongst interviewees that collective tenant participation in Northern Ireland's PRS is very limited. Some respondents highlighted historic initiatives and organisations. For example, S3 highlighted the work of the UK-wide organisation, Acorn,³ that had, at one stage, operated *"in and around Belfast. . . a brand which operates in Britain as well as a kind of a private rented movement. . . that was quite Belfast based . . . student based and. . . focussed on the whole lettings fees issue."* And S6 was aware of the (defunct) Private Tenants' Forum, which was considered in Section 2.

In terms of existing structures, S4 highlighted the work of Community Groups facilitated and supported by Supporting Communities,⁴ noting that they often addressed PRS issues: *"a lot of private rented related matters and issues are coming up through those [groups]"* (S4). But these groups have a broad remit and are not focused on the PRS. There are only two 'dedicated' collective PRS tenant participation structures currently in operation in Northern Ireland: Community Action Tenant Union (CATU); and, Renters' Voice.

³This organisation is still active in England and Wales but is not solely focussed on PRS issues, see <https://www.acorntheunion.org.uk/>

⁴<https://supportingcommunities.org/>

Renters' Voice

Currently, the most significant body providing a collective voice for tenants at the strategic level is Renters' Voice. It was established in November 2019 and since then has engaged private renters across Northern Ireland using a range of recruitment methods, including contacting private tenants who had accessed Housing Rights' Advice Service. It is funded by the Nationwide Foundation under their *Transforming the Private Rented Sector program*. In line with the aims of this program, it focuses on engaging tenants who are more likely to be experiencing challenges in their lives such as low-income households, households with young children, and older people. It is one of seven 'Tenants' Voice' projects operating across the UK. In Northern Ireland the project is supported by Housing Rights and has a full-time Co-Ordinator. The project is guided by a Steering Group that met for the first time in January 2020, with two further ('virtual') meetings taking place since then.

The key aims of Renters' Voice are to build: a strong voice for private tenants in Northern Ireland; and, a culture of tenant participation in development of the PRS. Activities have included: running regular tenant engagement sessions; developing accredited training for tenants involved in the project, and, an ongoing programme of tenant recruitment. While the focus has been on 'priority' issues, project plans have been designed to be flexible to facilitate project development in a tenant-led way over a three-year period. Activities during a challenging first year have been shaped by the COVID-19 pandemic, which has meant a focus on 'virtual' meetings.

Since 2020, a group of 8-10 'core participants' have been involved in these activities. Wider contact with private tenants has been maintained through surveys and social media and in March 2021 Renters' Voice had a mailing list comprising 133 tenants. Regular online tenants' meetings began in September 2020 and have been held on approximately a two-weekly basis since then, with regular attendance from the core participants and a focus on tenants' rights.

Online Renters' Voice Surveys were undertaken in March and May 2020 and focused on the early impact of COVID-19 on private tenants. Reports setting-out the findings of both these surveys, and supporting letters, were co-produced with a number of private tenants and forwarded to the Minister for Communities. Covid-related activities continued in early July 2020, when two online 'Tenants' Rights during COVID-19' webinar sessions were held with input from Housing Rights Advisers. Again, private tenants were involved in shaping the content of these sessions.

A further Renters' Voice Survey that was designed to examine the on-going impact of COVID-19, the 'bigger picture' for private renters in Northern Ireland and priorities for reform, was undertaken in October 2020. The importance of security of tenure as a key issue was highlighted by this survey and since November 2021, Renters' Voice has focused on a campaign calling for an end to No Fault Evictions or at least 6 months' Notice to Quit for private tenants. A supporting video was submitted to the Minister for Communities in February 2021, and the importance of the issue was reinforced by means of a two-week social media campaign on Twitter and Facebook.

Another important stream of work is now also underway. Accredited training sessions are being delivered to six tenants across five evenings on: 'Understanding the Private Rented Sector in Northern Ireland'. The first training unit was delivered in March/April 2021. A second unit, focusing on tenant participation, is scheduled to be delivered later in 2021.

Renters' Voice has already made a significant contribution to strengthening the voice of private tenants in Northern Ireland. It has brought together a core group on a regular basis to discuss key issues, in doing so, adding to the evidence base on the challenges of living in the PRS. In addition, the initiative has developed tenants' skills and knowledge and helped to develop their confidence. This report will return to the longer-term outlook and potential for Renters' Voice to close the tenant participation 'deficit' in the PRS in Northern Ireland in sections 6 and 7.

Community Action Tenants' Union (CATU)

In Northern Ireland, CATU operates as part of the all-island organisation with its philosophical roots in the trade union movement, which was recognised by S6 who noted that it *"seems to have some connection to the trade union movement"*. The same respondent noted that some members of CATU had previously been involved with Acorn. CATU sees itself as *"a union for people outside of their workplaces⁵"* that wants *"to take the basic ideas of membership, collective direct action, and grassroots democracy from where people work to where they live."* However, CATU is by no means just there to represent the interests of private tenants: *"we want to facilitate all people to defend their communities and housing... CATU is for council tenants, it's for mortgage holders, it's for those in emergency and precarious living situations"⁶*

In Belfast, however, CATU's Facebook page would indicate that the focus of its recent activities has been on a campaign against specific landlords who were seen to have acted incorrectly towards their tenants, notably picketing the offices of Boyle Properties who were seen to be *"charging unfair and unlawful fees without the proper proofs or receipts"*.⁷ This role was recognised by S6 who noted that in recent times CATU had taken on *"a more adversarial role ... launching campaigns outside letting agents' offices and landlords' houses"* (S3).

⁵<https://catuireland.org/about/>

⁶ibid.

⁷<https://www.facebook.com/CATUBelfast/photos/pcb.960864811118292/960864737784966/>

5. Obstacles to the introduction and extension of tenant participation

Respondents identified numerous obstacles to the extension of tenant participation in the PRS in Northern Ireland. Some were Northern Ireland specific; some were generic and related to the UK as a whole. Obstacles could be categorised into three groups: those relating to tenants; those relating to landlords; and, other obstacles.

Tenant related obstacles

Respondents identified a number of tenant related obstacles. First, it was reported that, because many PRS tenants viewed their stay in the sector as being a temporary one, they had less incentive to get involved: *"I don't think there are too many people who would be in the PRS who would imagine that they are going to be there long-term, and have a vested interest in being part of a group that would have a much more engagement role."* It was noted that for many PRS tenants residing in the "bottom-end" of the market, the SRS (and not the PRS) was their preferred tenure of choice: *"Very few of the people ... who live in that bottom-end of the private sector ... want to stay there forever, and if they get a chance they will move into the social rented accommodation" (S3).*

Even when tenants did engage, sustaining this involvement was challenging because of the short 'stays' of many within the sector: *"I suppose it is the nature of the tenancy. People are moving in and out of it. There are people who are in it for the longer-term. But a lot of people move in, move out and it is hard to get somebody who is going to sustain a long-term interest" (S6).* The lack of continuity that resulted created real issues for agencies looking to create sustainable, collective tenant participation structures: *"So people move. They move between landlords, which again breaks the link between who you are actually participating and engaging with... and they also move between tenures... and they will leave all those issues behind them" (S3).*

L1 reported that some tenants did not engage because they did not identify with being a tenant: *"The main reason for this [low levels of tenant participation] is that PRS tenants do not see themselves as tenants. It's not a notion that they congregate to. They don't identify with being a tenant. It's not in their top five things they identify with. Housing tenure is not important to them. Most landlords identify with being a landlord but most tenants don't identify with being a tenant."*

There were other reasons why tenants did not want to participate. One of the most commonly cited was the view that tenants did not believe that their views would be listened to if they did engage, and they could not influence the decision-making process: *"The main barrier to engagement, as I said before, is that tenants feel that they have no power or agency... They don't get involved because they don't feel they have any power. They can't control anything." (S1).* A number of respondents, including S2, reported that a power imbalance existed in the relationship between landlords and tenants: *"The... research [that was commissioned by the interviewees' organisation] highlighted the power imbalance in the relationship between landlords and tenants... the unequal relationship between landlords and tenants; the lack of a level playing field."*

It is worth reflecting further, at this juncture, on the nature of the relationship between landlords and tenants. There was a consensus amongst interviewees that many tenants enjoyed a positive relationship with their landlords, with this particularly being the case for those who let from a small landlord. However, there was concern that many tenants renting properties in the 'bottom-end' of the market did not experience good relationships with their landlords. And it was reported that tenants were often "fearful" of them, understandably, making it more likely that they would not engage individually (with their landlords) or *collectively*, through local participation structures. This 'fear' was evident in the apparent reluctance of many tenants to complain about the condition of their homes because they were concerned that doing so could elicit a negative response from their landlord, potentially jeopardising their tenancies: *"Another factor that puts them off [complaining] is upsetting their landlord. There is a real fear about complaining about landlords. Tenants are concerned that they will retaliate - they'll put their rents up or evict them" (S1).*

S6 noted that concern about the consequences of complaining was a particular issue in Northern Ireland because it *“is a small place.”* They continued to note this was more likely to be the case in smaller geographical sub-markets like Lurgan: *“People would be reluctant to complain because then it would get back to somebody, and then they are really stuck. They would have nowhere to go, so you do have to recognise the context. . . it’s different round Belfast where there would be bigger movement. But ‘round Lurgan most people would know, or know someone related, to the person who is your landlord.”*

Many PRS tenants in Northern Ireland rented from a family member or friend. S3 reported that this acted as a barrier to tenant participation: *“There’s an awful lot of that . . . living in a house that belongs to their uncle . . . there’s a lot of informal kind of tenancy arrangements that go on . . . familial or friendship . . . which totally negates this type of activity [tenant participation].”*

Another reported barrier to engagement, particularly at the collective level, was the lack of shared common *“causes”* between tenants which could potentially bring them together. This was attributed to the diversity of the PRS in Northern Ireland and the absence of larger landlords within the sector - it was easier for tenants to come together when they shared the same landlord: *“[60,000] different landlords . . . so what is your common cause? . . . not like the Housing Executive where there is a common landlord that you can engage with . . . you might be the only private tenant that landlord has so who are you going to join with to talk to that landlord. . . the issues are not common – they are worlds apart . . . the diversity of the sector makes it [tenant participation] almost impossible” (S3).*

Without a common ‘cause’ tenants would be less motivated to participate. They continued to note that tenants experiencing multiple disadvantage in the ‘bottom-end’ of the market were more likely to have a shared ‘cause’ because of the paucity of much of its housing stock: *“Many of the most effective tenant associations . . . were formed at a time when there was a common issue . . . people galvanise around a cause or an issue and if that issue is not there what would motivate you to do that . . . your life is busy enough . . . so the potential for this [tenant participation] is in that kind of sub-sector – the people who are experiencing disadvantage” (S2).*

Geography also mitigated against PRS tenants coming together, collectively – it was noted that they often did not live within close proximity to other PRS tenants, with much of the PRS stock in Northern Ireland being *“pepper-potted”* across it: *“[Private rented] tenants are also spread. They’re disparate. You might want have one tenant surrounded by homeowners on a housing estate. Why would you want to get involved? Tenants tend to get involved if their mates are going to a meeting. But they don’t live nearby. There is no neighbourhood planning for the PRS, like there is for SRS. PRS properties are pepper-potted” (S1).*

Respondents identified another tenant related obstacle to the successful extension of tenant participation in the PRS in Northern Ireland: the apparent reluctance of some tenant population groups to engage. It was reported that younger people were less likely to participate - *“There is an age thing. Younger tenants are less likely to get involved” (T2)* - as were middle income, less disadvantaged, tenants: *“Many PRS tenants have multiple deprivation. . . people that have a problem get involved. . . but the average tenant doesn’t get involved” (S1).*

Landlord related factors

Respondents identified a number of landlord related obstacles to the extension of tenant participation. First, it was noted that public sector agencies would find it very difficult to promote tenant participation because most landlords did not engage with them or landlord bodies. An officer from a Great Britain-based national landlord representative body noted: *“Many. . . most landlords are disconnected. Most landlords don’t want to connect - our members only account for 5.5 per cent of the market” (L1).*

S5 noted how the informality of the PRS in Northern Ireland, where, as noted earlier, many landlords let their properties to family members and friends, and transactions were conducted by cash, made it very difficult to identify landlords, particularly 'accidental' ones. These landlords did not come to the attention of local authorities, operating 'below-the-radar': *"The number of shared houses and tenancies that are being paid for by cash [is high]. Our knowledge on that is coming through the estate agents and local lettings officers... but it's not in the public domain... it's word of mouth"* (S5).

The challenge of identifying 'accidental' landlords was made more difficult by the reported desire of many of them not to be identified as landlords, so they could avoid contact with local authorities and being regulated by them: *"You are not dealing with a really large stakeholder [like NIHE]. You are dealing with individuals many of whom do not want anybody to know that they are a landlord. They are doing it through a frontage; through a letting agent or estate agent. And the last thing they want anybody to know is that they are actual landlords. So that is a real problem when you are trying to engage with them"* (S6).

And many 'accidental' landlords did not identify with being a landlord and did not view themselves as being one, adding another obstacle in the way of promoting tenant participation: *"They ['accidental' landlords] didn't choose to be in the sector - it happened by accident... they don't see themselves as landlords."* In similar fashion, S6 commented: *"A number of people... don't even consider themselves to be landlords."*

Even if messages about the importance and value of tenant participation did reach landlords, there was a belief that many of them would not be receptive to them and would not embrace tenant engagement. S6 noted how many landlords, particularly those providing poorer quality housing, did not want to give their tenants 'voice': *"The landlords [operating in the bottom-end of the market] do not want to have a forum that has a voice that can rant against their bad practices - even if they care about their bad practices."* Another respondent noted that many landlords simply did not see engaging with their tenants as one of their functions: *"There is also a cultural barrier as engaging with tenants is seen by landlords as something they don't do"* (L2).

L1 felt that the reluctance of many landlords to want engage with their tenants was understandable (and legitimate) because they were commercial enterprises. He highlighted the disquiet articulated by private landlords when they were compared (in relation to tenant participation) to social housing landlords. L1 and landlords noted that this comparison was unfair, observing that the contexts within which they operated were very different as were their operandi modus - unlike social landlords, private landlords have no social obligations: *"But the pressures that landlords face in the sectors are completely different. There are too many comparisons between the sectors. Landlords get frustrated by them. They get annoyed by the expectations put on them: 'Why should we do these things because we're different?'"* PRS landlords have different motivations than social landlords. *They care about their tenants and have a social responsibility, but ultimately they're businesses with business objectives."*

Even if landlords were inclined to engage with their tenants, some would be deterred from doing so because *"they are fearful: they are worried that if they engage with their tenants they will start coming to them with lots of problems and keep ringing them"* (S1). The same respondent continued: *"There is a landlord who is a plumber who told me that his heart races when his phone rings in case it's his tenant. He has a real fear of contacting them. He thinks that if he engages with his tenant they will be more likely to raise problems."*

A number of respondents reported that many 'accidental' landlords were ill-equipped to engage with their tenants. They lacked the resources to be an effective landlord and were sometimes unaware of the responsibilities associated with being one. S6 was particularly critical about the capabilities of some 'accidental' landlords, who they felt did not have the knowledge and skills to be a good landlord: *"A number of people ['accidental' landlords] haven't got a clue what they are doing"*. However, the same respondent continued to note that 'accidental' landlords *"are left unsupported, largely."*

Other obstacles

Respondents identified two other obstacles. Letting agents were identified by a number of respondents as being a barrier to tenant participation: *"In the mainstream sector, third party - letting agents - involvement is the biggest barrier. That's the biggest barrier."* Similarly, T1 noted: *"Yes [letting agents are a barrier to engagement]. Landlords need to be regulated, but so do letting agents. They play both sides off. They squeeze landlords and they squeeze tenants."*

The absence of any regulatory requirement from Government for landlords to involve their tenants is an important obstacle to the extension of tenant participation in PRS. S1 noted that without the introduction of regulation to make landlords engage with their tenants, they would be unlikely to do so: *"The SRS is regulated but the PRS isn't! The Housing White Paper on social housing that came out a couple of weeks ago stressed the importance of tenant engagement... it mentions a 'consumer charter'... there isn't the same emphasis for the PRS... They [tenants] should have agency. But unless the Government regulates the sector... this is never going to happen."*

6. Extending tenant participation in the PRS in Northern Ireland

This section explores the views of participants in relation to the key focus of this study: extending tenant participation in the PRS in Northern Ireland. It draws on responses to a number of broad themes addressed during discussions with key informants:

- The nature and scale of the challenge facing the Department and other stakeholders
- Key design and implementation principles
- Possible tenant participation mechanisms

The challenge

There was general agreement that extending tenant participation in the PRS in Northern Ireland would not be an easy task. Comments like *"hugely challenging"* (S3) and *"it's going to be really difficult"* (S5) illustrate awareness of the obstacles highlighted in the previous section and recognition of the fact that extending tenant participation in the context of the PRS will be significantly more challenging than doing so in the SRS.

However, there was a consensus that the scale of the challenge would differ across the sector - landlords with larger portfolios would be more receptive to tenant participation than their smaller counterparts: *"I think we are not talking about rolling this out to smaller scale landlords... the institutional investors [who are now showing an interest in larger scale build-to-rent schemes in Belfast] would be receptive to that idea [a collective tenant voice] and be able to sell it as a benefit to tenants"* (L3). Furthermore, larger landlords were better placed to encourage their tenants to engage: *"Something could go out in the landlords' newsletter which highlights this group being set up... gauge what the level of interest would be"* (S6).

Key principles

Interviewees highlighted a number of design and implementation principles that should underpin any extension of tenant participation in the PRS in Northern Ireland. The importance of consulting with stakeholders at the beginning of the process was highlighted. It was noted that any consultation process should recognise the diversity of the different sub-markets within the PRS because *"things that might be appropriate to one bit of it [the PRS] aren't appropriate to the other"* (L3).

There was general agreement that additional resources (from Government) would be required if tenant participation was to be successfully extended within the PRS in Northern Ireland: *"Thinking back to the social sector as well, how much of that would have happened organically? It has been facilitated, fostered and encouraged. And I think that is absolutely right. But there hasn't been anything like that in the Private Rented Sector. Quite a lot of resources needed to be invested to bring it to actual fruition"* (S3). In a similar vein, S3 noted: *[the extension of tenant participation is] "not going to happen without some investment of resources... those resources would not come from the landlords themselves so the Department would need to be prepared to put some money behind it"* (S3).

In principle, the Department has indicated that it has no problem with this – it already provides funding that supports the activities of the Housing Policy Panel and Renters' Voice. However, funding *"would depend what the [tenant participation] model would look like and what the requirement would be"* (S6). A number of respondents highlighted the importance of providing resource to support tenants to engage: *"Resource is another issue - tenants need to be supported to engage. Doing this can help to equalise the relationship between landlords and tenants"* (S2).

Several respondents argued that any extension of tenant participation should incorporate a regulatory framework. However, it was emphasised that this framework should be 'light-touch' because *"landlords have already seen a lot of changes in legislation. They don't respond well to being told what to do and how to do it"* (L3). In a similar vein, S3 noted: *"I don't think you can prescribe it. But there are probably things that the Department [for Communities] could do to encourage it, which is different from making sure it happens or requiring it"*.

The importance of incentivising landlords to engage with their tenants was highlighted by a number of respondents: *"It's hard to see from the landlords' perspective... landlords would only be interested if there is some kind of incentive in it for them... access to grants or something of that nature"* (S3). S5 was of the same opinion: *"The only way to do that is to give them an incentive; a tax break on it."* Incentives had to be tailored to landlord type: *"What might bring the more organised bigger landlords to the table is probably different from what would bring individual [small-scale] landlords to the table... for some of them it is a business and for others it is really just an asset to probably: hopefully [to] accrue a bit of added value over the years"* (S3).

There was a view that whatever approach was taken to extending tenant participation, it should 'start small' and be developed incrementally. S6 believed that creating a collective tenant participation body would be the most appropriate first step: *"I think they [the Department] need to set up something as a starting point... an independent body that will capacitate and advocate not on behalf of individuals but collectively."*

Potential structures

As part of a discussion about approaches to tenant participation, interviewees were asked whether they felt that lessons learnt from the SRS were transferrable to the PRS. There was a consensus that, because of the significant differences between the sectors, approaching tenant participation in the same way *"would be a guaranteed recipe for failure"* (S3). Notwithstanding this, there was a view that some key lessons were transferrable - the importance of: good communication; listening to tenants and ensuring that their voices are heard and acted upon; and, ensuring that participation is not *"imposed"* on tenants (S4). There was also a view that learning about specific tenant participation mechanisms could be transferred.

Interviewees were asked to share their thoughts on a range of commonly used participation structures and mechanisms in the SRS and their suitability for the PRS. There was support for using 'traditional' structures, such as community-based residents' groups. In rural areas, in particular, Community Groups were seen as a natural building block for extending tenant participation in the PRS: *"They are ideally placed. They are running all sorts of schemes and doing all sorts of things in the local community... Community Groups are key"* (S6). There was also support for 'traditional' methods of communication, such as meetings in community halls. The importance of providing a focus for such meetings - for example, the repairs service or arrears/benefits advice - was highlighted. Non-traditional communication methods were also valued with a number of interviewees noting that social media platforms were an effective way of engaging with tenants and had great 'reach': *"very few people aren't on some form of social media"* (S6).

There was support for collective sub-regional/ regional/ national structures. There was particular support for a Northern Ireland-wide body fulfilling a strategic, policy informing, role: *"I don't see that there is the demand for tenants to get together at the local level. It's more at a strategic level which can influence policy"* (S4). In this context, lessons can be learnt from the experience of the Housing Policy Panel established by Supporting Communities to provide policy and regulatory advice to Government in relation, primarily, to social housing issues.

The potential for the Housing Community Network to fulfil this strategic, Northern Ireland-wide, role was discussed with a number of the Northern Ireland based interviewees. There was concern that it was not well placed to do so as PRS issues could, potentially, be overshadowed by SRS ones: *"the issues that genuinely emerge for the Private Rented Sector could be dwarfed [by SRS issues]"* (S3). As a result, S5 felt: *"I think that they [the Department] would have to build something that is more appropriate to the private rented side."*

A number of interviewees mooted the possibility of Renters' Voice potentially becoming the vehicle for collective, strategic collective engagement in Northern Ireland: *"Renters' Voice is almost a starting point, let the people get round the table... here are the Terms of Reference... that role can grow as they become more confident, as the relationship changes, as they build up a bit of trust in their engagement with Government or with LANI"* (S4). The same respondent emphasised the importance of a revamped Renters' Voice focusing its attention on strategic issues: *"Maybe from a strategic point of view Renters' Voice can have a conversation with Departmental officials about looking at strategy and some policy stuff, about regulation - for example, NTQ [Notice to Quit] minimum standards... as opposed to the nitty gritty - maintenance problems and my burst pipe"*.

Some participants also recognised the potential value of a multi-stakeholder that brought together landlord representatives (for example, LANI), tenant representatives, Departmental officials and representatives from other stakeholder organisations in order to inform policy and practice. S6 was an advocate of this approach: *"It's good sometimes to have both sides represented in a room because it can provoke a lot of debate and it can certainly help the other side to maybe get a slightly different perspective on issues... Anything that encourages dialogue, discussion and debate and improves the understanding of other people's perspectives could only be a good thing"*.

T1 represented his renters' union on a multi-stakeholder forum in England. He outlined the nature and scope of the forum: *"The Forum discusses how to deal with PRS issues. Lots of bodies are represented on it. The Bond Board are on it - they provide tenancy deposits. xx [homeless charity] are on it. The xx combined authority are on it. It's a public body so there our minutes... It makes recommendations and reports to the Combined authority, to xx, the Mayor of xx, who has responsibility for housing... It has a list of rogue landlords. The forum also looks at what other boroughs are doing."*

T1 felt that the forum performed an important function and he was happy to be a member of it. However, he felt that its powers were limited. And while he felt that tenant members were listened to, their lack of power meant that they could not effect change: *"We're listened to. But we're not the gatekeeper. We have no power. Landlords have power - they have the law on their side. The Forum works on a consensus basis. But it's an unequal relationship between landlords and tenants. It is very difficult for the Forum to achieve anything. There is nothing we can do. We try and persuade the Combined Authority to do stuff, but they're limited with what they can do. The Government sets the agenda. We don't have any big levers to do things."*

Whatever the form collective participation mechanisms take, it is essential that tenants who are involved are representative of the broader tenant population, argued a number of respondents. There was recognition that Councils could play a key role, here: *"The more I think about it the more I think there is some kind of role for Councils and Community Groups [in helping to secure tenant representation]"* (S3). They were well placed to do so because they were in contact with local private renters through their PRS (enforcement), community development and environmental health roles. Furthermore, their involvement would help to ensure that any regional/ Northern Ireland-wide structures were geographically representative, while they are well placed to identify tenants to participate in local authority wide collective structures. However, it was also noted that Councils would expect additional resources to enable this new role to be taken on. *"They are just stretched too far... they don't have the capacity, with the exception maybe of Belfast"* (S5).

As highlighted above, respondents also felt that tenants could be identified via Community Groups. S6 commented that Community Groups could promote collective participation structures on their webpages: *"Ask Community Groups to release it on their [web]page as well"*. It was suggested that tenants could also be identified using private Housing Benefit/ Universal Credit data or Tenancy Deposit Scheme data (subject to GDPR considerations).

7. Conclusion

Introduction

In the wake of the Grenfell disaster, tenant participation -how tenants “*can influence a . . . landlord’s activity*” (Pawson *et al.*, 2012 p.3) - has re-emerged as a key policy concern for the UK Government. Its attention has focused on the SRS. However, with more households renting from private landlords and the focus on making the sector “*a more attractive housing option for more people*”, there have been calls for it to be extended in the PRS, where historically, tenant participation has largely been confined to ‘bottom-up’ activism. This is the context within which the Department for Communities commissioned CaCHE to undertake a study that would examine tenant participation in Northern Ireland and, in doing so, highlighting the potential barriers to its extension and, potentially, how it could be extended.

This exploratory study, which draws primarily on 11 in-depth interviews with key ‘stakeholders’ across Northern Ireland and Great Britain including tenant and landlord representatives, found tenant participation in the PRS in Northern Ireland to be on a very limited scale. There is currently only one independent, tenant-initiated ‘bottom-up’ collective engagement vehicle in operation within Northern Ireland - Community Action Tenants Union (CATU) - and one, recently established, agency led initiative: Renters’ Voice. In terms of tenants’ ability to influence their landlords’ activity through engaging with them individually, it was found to be relatively limited, which is line with the picture elsewhere in the UK. However, it was reported that many landlords, particularly smaller ones, enjoy excellent relations with their tenants and do engage with them.

The remainder of this section is concerned with highlighting: the key findings to emerge from the research; the key principles that should underpin any strategy to extend tenant participation in the PRS in Northern Ireland; tenant participation mechanisms that might be employed as part of this process; and, an agenda for further research in this area.

Key messages

Participants reported that extending tenant participation in the PRS in Northern Ireland would bring benefits for Government, tenants and, landlords. For Government, there was a consensus that involving tenants through collective participation mechanisms would result in better policy and decision making. Tenant participation brought a number of benefits to tenants including: ‘smoother’ tenancies; better mental health; and, greater agency. It was reported that a number of benefits accrue to landlords from tenant participation. Critically, in terms of making the case for tenant participation to landlords, it reportedly resulted in increased yields. This was because engaging with tenants resulted in lower levels of arrears and less resource being devoted to repairs, as they took better care of their homes, and alerted landlords to problems as soon as they occurred, thereby stopping repairs from escalating in severity.

Extending tenant participation in the PRS in Northern Ireland will not be straightforward. The study identified a number of significant barriers to its extension. These included: the absence of any regulatory requirement for private landlords to involve their tenants; the relatively short stay of many tenants within the sector, which meant they had less investment in the sector and therefore less motivation to get involved; and, the prevalence of small, ‘accidental’ landlords within it, many of whom were ‘disconnected’ and difficult to engage.

Key principles

Any strategy for extending tenant participation must to take account of these, and the other, obstacles identified by the study team, and must be realistic about what might be achieved. The following guiding principles should underpin any strategy:

- It is important that all key stakeholders are consulted prior to the development of the strategy. Given the diversity of the PRS in Northern Ireland, it is important that all landlord types are represented within this process, along

with tenants from all of the sub-markets that make-up the sector.

- Whatever approach is taken to any extension of tenant participation, it is imperative that it is resourced adequately.
- There is merit in introducing a regulatory framework for tenant participation, although this, initially, should be 'light-touch'.
- Providing landlords with incentives to engage with their tenants is likely to result in higher levels of participation, as will demonstrating the commercial benefits of tenant participation to them.
- The experience of developing tenant participation in the SRS would indicate that any development of tenant participation in the PRS in Northern Ireland should 'start small', with the approach being developed incrementally over time.

Tenant participation mechanisms

The context for tenant participation across the SRS and PRS is vastly different, meaning that lessons learnt in the former are not easily transferred to the latter. However, there is one area where there is some scope for learning to be transferred: tenant participation mechanisms. Some of this learning has been incorporated into the recommendations below:

- In the absence of a regulatory requirement for landlords to engage with their tenants and the prevalence of small, accidental landlords, in the short term, attention should focus on extending tenant participation through collective mechanisms. At the Northern Ireland level, there is already an agency led tenant participation vehicle in place: Renters' Voice. The core group of tenants who regularly provide input and feedback on issues of general concern to private tenants could relatively easily be more formally convened as a PRS Policy Panel (like the Housing Policy Panel already in operation for the SRS). This group could also be upskilled to provide a nucleus of 'champions', providing advice, guidance and support, playing a key role in establishing regional and sub-regional structures which potentially could feed into Renters' Voice or any new Northern Ireland-wide collective participation structure.
- There is merit in establishing a multi-stakeholder PRS forum(s), like the one highlighted in Section 6. It could have a Northern Ireland-wide remit or focus and/ or forums could be established in council areas.
- Potentially, Councils and Community Groups could play a key role in identifying tenants who may be willing to sit on collective structures. Their involvement will make it more likely that tenant members are as representative as possible of the broader tenant population, which, given the diversity of the PRS in Northern Ireland, should be a key concern. However, ensuring that collective participation structures are 'representative' will give them greater legitimacy.
- Historically, the most common way of engaging tenants collectively has been through meetings. However, alternative methods, specifically, digital methods, should also be provided. This will make it more likely that tenants will be able to identify an engagement structure 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 participating. 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.

- If tenants choose to participate, 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.

Further research

As there has been relatively little research into tenant participation in the PRS not only in Northern Ireland, but in the UK as whole, any research undertaken in the field would be welcomed. However, it would be particularly helpful to see further research into the following issues:

Tenants' views on tenant participation. This should address a range of questions, including:

- What do tenants want from tenant participation?
- What do they see as its purpose?
- What issues would they like to have some influence over?
- What motivates tenants to participate?
- How would they like to be engaged?
- What are their views on digital engagement?
- What is the experience of 'engaged' tenants, specifically those involved in collective tenant participation vehicles? whether agency-led or 'bottom-up', tenant-led initiatives?

Landlords' views on tenant participation, which should explore a range of issues, including:

- What would encourage them to engage with their tenants?
- What form would they like to see tenant participation take?
- What issues do they feel that tenants should be involved in?
- What are the benefits and costs to landlords of tenant participation?
- The impact of tenant participation in the PRS, which should highlight the costs and benefits associated with it for Government, landlords and tenants. Potentially, this research could be used to promote tenant participation to landlords as it is likely to highlight a number of benefits to landlords from tenant participation.
- The impact of existing tenant participation mechanisms in Northern Ireland and that of new ones. This will highlight the costs and benefits associated with tenant participation mechanisms, in doing so highlighting, 'what works, when and how'.
- Given the diversity of the PRS in Northern Ireland, it is vitally important that the issues highlighted above are unpacked by tenant population group and sub-markets.

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Appendix – Interviewees: Organisation descriptions

Reference	Descriptor
L1	National landlord representative body with a predominantly England and Wales focus
L2	UK-wide national real estate representative body
L3	Northern Ireland-based landlord representative body
T1	Renters' union based in England
T2	International tenants' union
S1	PRS initiative being overseen by national homelessness charity
S2	Lobbying body
S3	Northern Ireland-based organisation providing housing advice and support
S4	Northern Ireland-based independent charitable organisation that promotes tenant and community participation
S5	Northern Ireland housing body
S6	Northern Ireland Government Department