

Key themes from inspections

Tenant participation

August 2005

This is the second in a series of reports by the Regulation and Inspection Division of Communities Scotland (R&I) drawing together key findings from R&I's programme of cyclical inspections of registered social landlords (RSLs) and local authorities.

This document can also be made available on tape, in Braille, large print and community languages.

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Executive Summary

Our inspection reports identify those areas of housing services that are working well and those that could be better. They also highlight examples of positive practice. This report combines the findings of the pathfinder inspections of 5 local authorities and 22 RSLs to highlight the key themes that emerged on tenant participation and responsiveness to tenants.

Tenant participation is at the heart of the Scottish Executive's housing agenda. Tenant's rights and landlords' responsibilities are set out in legislation. The aim of this report is to:

- increase awareness of some of the key issues in tenant participation;
- help local authority and registered social landlords (in conjunction with their tenants) to change services by identifying common areas for improvement and positive practice examples; and
- help improve the experience of tenants and service users.

Key findings

- Almost all of the pathfinder organisations had prepared a tenant participation strategy and around two thirds of landlords had made real efforts to develop their strategy in consultation with tenant organisations and tenants.
- Few organisations had made a comprehensive assessment of resources required or proposed to implement the strategy and few had set SMART targets or identified responsibilities to take it forward.
- Around a quarter of pathfinder landlords had no registered tenant organisations operating in their areas.
- A number of landlords did not consult with tenants and tenant organisations on specific landlord proposals (e.g. proposed rent increases) and were not meeting their statutory requirements on participation and consultation.
- In recognition that many tenants do not wish to, or are not able to, be part of a formal group - a number of landlords had set up structures to increase participation opportunities for tenants and other service users. They demonstrated these participation opportunities were influencing service delivery.
- Most organisations were not collecting feedback from service users on a regular basis about the quality of the services they receive.
- Around one in five landlords were not making the best use of already available feedback to improve housing services.
- Few landlords gave feedback to those who participated in consultation exercises.
- Two thirds of inspections found that pathfinder landlords were providing good quality information to tenants and service users in a range of formats.

1. Introduction

This is the second in a series¹ of reports of key themes from Communities Scotland's inspection of registered social landlords and local authorities in their housing and homelessness services.

In this report, we highlight key themes from the pathfinder inspections of 22 RSLs and ²five local authorities inspected during 2003 and 2004. The profile of organisations inspected broadly represents a cross-section of all landlord organisations. Annex 1 provides a list of pathfinder organisations.

Individual inspection reports identify things that are working well and areas where they could be better. This report, which draws together the findings from these individual pathfinder inspections, is aimed mainly at members, managers and staff in local authorities and RSLs. Tenants and tenant groups will also find it useful. It is intended to raise awareness of some of the key issues in tenant participation; help landlords (in conjunction with their tenants) change services by identifying common³ areas for improvement and examples of positive practice; and ultimately to help improve the experience of tenants and service users.

2. Context

Tenant participation is at the heart of the Scottish Executive's housing agenda. The Housing (Scotland) Act 2001 (sections 53-56) introduced a range of statutory requirements relating to tenant participation, and the Scottish Executive subsequently published guidance on the Act's tenant participation provisions (SE7/2002). The Performance Standard on tenant participation (GS2.2) requires social landlords to publish and implement a sound strategy for encouraging and supporting tenants, residents and service users to participate in all areas of their work. And to support tenants who take an active interest in managing their homes. Standard (GS3.1) on responsiveness to service users requires social landlords to place the people who want to use their services at the heart of their work, treat people with respect and be responsive to their views and priorities.

The pathfinder inspections reveal a mixed picture in relation to tenant participation, consultation and provision of information. At the time of inspection, a number of organisations had developed a good approach to tenant participation, setting up comprehensive structures to promote involvement and

¹ Our first report of Key Themes from Inspections – Homelessness is available on our web site at www.communitiesscotland.gov.uk

² Two of the local authority inspections (Inverclyde and Stirling) concentrated on homelessness only.

³ Where possible we have quantified the proportions of landlords, but the features of tenant participation undertaken by landlords, and those reported on, varied according to context.

using service user feedback in developing services. By contrast, a small number of organisations had yet to finalise their tenant participation strategies and were failing to meet their statutory duties relating to tenant participation. The common themes on tenant participation and responsiveness that emerged from the pathfinder inspections are set out in the following areas of practice.

3. Tenant participation strategy

The Scottish Executive guidance (SE7/2002) required all RSLs and local authority landlords (in consultation with their tenants and tenant groups) to have developed and published a tenant participation strategy by 31 March 2003. The strategy should include an assessment of resources required to implement it; include an assessment of the specific needs of equalities groups; set SMART targets; and identify responsibilities for taking the strategy forward.

Almost all of the pathfinder organisations had prepared a tenant participation strategy. Around two thirds of landlords had made real efforts to develop their tenant participation strategy in consultation with tenant organisations and tenants. In some cases the inclusive approach taken by landlords had led to delays in finalising the strategy. By contrast around one in six inspections found that organisations needed further work to develop their strategy to reflect their own circumstances - and these organisations all needed to complete the work on their strategy and begin to put it into action as soon as possible.

Few organisations had made a comprehensive assessment of resources required to support effective participation and implement the strategy. Few organisations had set SMART targets for tenant participation or identified responsibilities to take it forward.

Positive practice examples 1 and 2:

(1) Tenant participation steering group

Castlehill Housing Association has set up a Tenant Participation Steering Group to help develop its Tenant Participation Strategy further. It has developed a clear action plan to take forward objectives in the strategy and is following a steady approach that is appropriate to the organisation.

(2) Resident participation strategy – inclusive approach

Orkney Housing Association faces particular challenges as a rural island community with dispersed, remote housing stock. It has made particular efforts to get its service users involved in the preparation of a Resident Participation Strategy, in order to reflect their priorities. Nine local consultation sessions with residents were held with the support of the Tenant Participation Advisory Service (TPAS). Newsletters were issued to residents advising of the process, with questionnaires included, seeking their views on, for example, preferred venues and meeting times. A programme of training sessions was also made available to interested residents.

Positive practice example 3:

(3) Tenant participation structures and strategy development

Atrium Homes has set up a range of structures to promote tenant involvement, and there are good examples of how participation is beginning to influence service delivery. It has, for example:

- set up a tenant participation focus group, which has reviewed Atrium's participation strategy and has a detailed action plan;
- set up a register for tenants to identify issues they want to be consulted on;
- given staff time and financial help to support new tenants' groups, and consulted with the groups;
- involved tenants in selecting contractors and in making decisions about a kitchen replacement programme; and
- subsequently re-scheduled contracts in the five-year maintenance plan to take account of tenants' priorities.

4. Tenant organisations

RSLs and local authorities must (under Section 53(3) of the Housing (Scotland) Act 2001) support and register tenant organisations and set up a publicly available register of tenant organisations (SE7/2002 sets out the range of criteria and provisions relating to RTOs).

About a quarter of pathfinder inspections found that there were no registered tenant organisations operating within the landlord's area. However, a number of these landlords had criteria/procedures in place to register tenant organisations and were hopeful that they would register organisations in the future. In recognition that many tenants and service users do not wish to, and are not able to, get involved in formal groups - a number of landlords had set up alternative structures to increase opportunities for participation from tenants and other service users. They were able to point to examples to demonstrate how participation was influencing service delivery.

Positive practice example 4:

(4) Supporting a variety of tenants' organisations

The Community Services department at Queens Cross Housing Association has been established to manage the Association's supported housing projects but also to co-ordinate the support given to a large number of community groups. Many of the groups' activities have nothing to do with housing but the Association takes full advantage of these links with its residents to encourage participation. Supporting community groups like fishing, and sewing clubs, for example, encourages community activity and participation, and builds capacity for participation and influence on Queens Cross's activities, which can be developed further when appropriate. The department also uses general community activities such as the annual gala day and festive activities, to promote the work of the Association and generate community awareness and support.

Positive practice example 5:

(5) East Lothian Tenants and Residents Panel

East Lothian Council has helped to set up an East Lothian Tenants and Residents Panel (ELTRP), made up of nominees from the network of local Tenants and Residents Associations. Since it was set up in 1999, the Council has demonstrated a clear commitment to developing ELTRP's role as an independent consultative body in a variety of ways, including:

- funding the employment of a full-time worker to provide independent training, development and support for the Panel;
- providing serviced office accommodation; and
- supplying a delegated budget of £19,000 to support the Panel in implementing its agreed Business Plan.

The Council has also worked closely with the Panel to develop a Communication Code of Practice, which sets out how it will work with ELTRP and other service users in the future. ELTRP members who have taken part in activities like service reviews feel that the Council has listened to their views and that they have influenced the Council's policies and approaches.

5. Consultation with tenants

The Housing (Scotland) Act 2001 requires landlords to notify tenants and RTOs about proposals, policies or service standards relating to housing management, repairs or maintenance where such a proposal is likely to affect the tenant, and to take into account of views expressed. This requirement should be reflected in an organisations' tenant participation strategy.

The extent of consultation varied greatly across the pathfinder organisations. A number did not consult with tenants and tenant organisations on specific landlord proposals – and were therefore not fulfilling their statutory duty for participation and consultation. For example, around one in six inspections found that landlords failed to meet their statutory duty to consult tenants on proposed rent increases.

Many landlords were not proactive in their approach – for example, using articles in newsletters as their sole means to consult with tenants. By contrast, a number of the organisations inspected could demonstrate that they had carried out significant consultation. They used a range of methods on various issues required by the Housing (Scotland) Act 2001, particularly on the introduction of the Scottish Secure Tenancy agreement.

Positive practice examples 6, 7 and 8:

(6) Register of interested tenants

Castlehill Housing Association has set up a Register of Interested Tenants, in which tenants can highlight those areas that they are particularly interested in and about which they would like to be consulted. This is one way that landlords can engage with individual tenants who would not routinely get involved in consultation exercises.

(7) Consultation with homeless people

Augment is a voluntary sector organisation working to support people with mental health problems in Angus. Angus Council funded Augment to train volunteers with mental health problems, and experience of homelessness, to carry out consultation with people who are currently using the Council's homeless service. The volunteers then fed this information back to Angus Council. The Council plans to use this approach to obtain further feedback from homeless people.

(8) Consulting tenants on planned maintenance

West Dunbartonshire Council gives tenants good opportunities to be involved in its planned maintenance and improvement works. It consults with tenants' groups on the strategic issues of the annual programme priorities. It also consults on individual projects on aspects such as design and finishes, and is good at keeping tenants informed on the progress of work.

6. Information to tenants

Landlords should provide good quality, comprehensive information on all their services and make it available to all tenants and service users.

Two thirds of pathfinder inspections highlighted that the landlord was providing good quality information in a range of formats to all appropriate tenants and service users. For example, newsletters, handbooks and websites. Some were also involving tenants in the design and content of information provided. It was easiest for people to find information in landlords' own offices and few landlords had thought about reaching tenants and potential service users in places not directly linked to housing, such as public buildings or voluntary agencies.

Information on services provided was more readily available than information on service standards and performance. Most landlords limited this to performance against some key targets in their annual reports. The pathfinder inspections generally found that the lack of performance information available to tenants and service users was limiting their ability to influence service priorities and standards.

Positive practice examples 9, 10, 11 and 12:

(9) Information for other service users

Wishaw & District Housing Association has designed and provided a good suite of information for its sharing owners, including a very helpful Handbook.

(10) User friendly website

On its website, Eildon Housing Association provides an excellent range of user friendly information on its houses, services, plans and policies, job vacancies and on contacting people in the organisation.

This includes:

- Information about the range of services it provides for tenants and sharing owners, including those services for people with particular needs, e.g. older people, those with learning difficulties, dementia/respite services and housing adaptations
- Details of its long term programme for upgrading & maintaining its houses, including estimated costs
- Downloadable versions of its strategic plan, annual accounts, index of key policies and its complaints policy.

(11) Young persons' task group

Inverclyde Council set up a multi disciplinary task group to take an overview of housing for young people, which includes the homeless team. The group was instrumental in developing and obtaining funding for the Streets Ahead information pack, and associated training. The Council also has its own Resource Directory that provides local information. The pack has been distributed to the Homeless centre, Careers Scotland and Youth Network. The group now includes a guidance teacher and the next stage is to roll it out as part of a Housing Education project in local secondary schools, targeted at pupils who may be at risk of homelessness.

(12) Information for prisoners

Inverclyde Council has been providing an information and advice service at HMP Greenock since 2003. In their work with people who are due to be released from prison, staff provide information and advice about housing options and referrals to other agencies to try and avoid people becoming homeless.

7. Participation techniques

Landlords should employ a range of participation, consultation and information techniques appropriate to their operating context. They should work with their tenants and service users to agree the most appropriate participation techniques and should employ them methodically and systematically.

Across the social rented sector, there is evidence that landlords are using a range of methods to collect views from tenants and service users. However, most organisations are not collecting feedback from service users on a regular basis about the quality of the services they receive. Around one in five pathfinder inspections found that landlords were gathering views on an adhoc basis - and around one in five were not making best use of available feedback to improve housing services. A number of organisations need to build on their tenant participation work by providing service users with more opportunities to give their views on the quality of services, and need to take account of feedback in future service developments. A number of organisations need to develop a more strategic approach to finding out what tenants and other service users think of services.

A key part of the participation process is providing feedback to those who participate, so they know whether their effort has had any effect. However, the pathfinder inspections found that few landlords gave feedback to people who participated in consultation exercises.

Positive practice example 13:

(13) Tenant participation and feedback on participation exercises

Prospect Community Housing co-ordinates its approach to participation through the work of the Participation Action Team (PAT), a multi departmental working group. It uses a range of methods for consulting tenants, including a tenant satisfaction survey, a quarterly newsletter, feedback questionnaires, short life focus groups and repairs service satisfaction slips. Every year Prospect surveys its tenants to ask if current participation methods are still the most appropriate. Prospect also recognises the importance of giving feedback to people who participate. It has developed a database of responses to consultation exercises. Tenants who return a questionnaire or feedback survey get personal responses along with a summary report that advises them of the management committee's decision and the outcome of the particular issue they responded on. This is a very responsive approach to involving service users.

Positive practice examples 14, 15 and 16:

(14) Tenant participation influencing service delivery

Rosehill Housing Co-operative has no formal or registered tenants' organisations. However, it has set up structures to promote involvement, and we found good examples of how participation influences service delivery:

- the Co-operative proactively seeks contributions and views from tenants in its quarterly newsletters;
- Rosehill involved tenants through focus groups in the drawing up of its tenant satisfaction survey;
- it surveyed tenants on what issues they would like further consultation on; and to identify their preferred methods for future consultation.

(15) Integral approach to tenant participation

Paragon Housing Association takes a positive approach to Tenant Participation, as an integral element across the organisation and its services. Particular examples of this positive approach include:

- collecting tenants' views through surveys about what Paragon's priorities should be, and including results in future planning.
- creating a Focus Group to give tenants and service users the opportunity to directly influence Paragon's service development and future priorities;
- involving tenants and residents in the design and procurement process for property improvements in Grangemouth;
- consulting tenants about their preferences when procuring new fittings such as kitchens and replacement windows, and offering a range of choices and styles as a matter of course; and
- providing support to tenants' and residents' groups;

(16) Tenant participation involving excluded groups

Ardenglen Housing Association recognises that people with learning difficulties should have the same opportunity as others to participate in the work of the Association. It worked with a local support organisation to provide information in a format more easily understandable to its small number of tenants with learning difficulties. This included producing a pictorial copy of its participation questionnaire, which also allowed people to select symbols or words for their answers. This had a 100% response rate. Ardenglen also provided these tenants with a pictorial version of their tenancy agreement.

Positive practice example 17:

(17) Approach to encouraging residents to participate in the activities of a rural island community with dispersed, remote stock

Orkney Housing Association has developed a local approach to participation, which suits their tenants and meets local needs. They support a number of representative groups to promote involvement, and there are good examples of how participation is beginning to influence service delivery. It has, for example:

- made staff available, given financial help and offered training opportunities to support new residents' groups, and consulted with these groups;
- conducted quarterly open forums at various locations throughout the Orkney islands, which enabled interested individuals to receive information and be consulted on issues and services;
- involved tenants in choosing kitchen fitments as part of a modernisation programme; and
- responded to the views of some tenants who indicated that they would prefer showers to be installed in their bathrooms in advance of their kitchens being replaced.

8. Further information

This report highlights only key or common findings from the Pathfinder inspections. More details of these, and information on the full assessment of tenant participation in councils and RSLs are contained in the published inspection reports. These are available on our website at www.communitiesscotland.gov.uk

Our Guide to Inspection is available on our website at www.inspection.communitiesscotland.gov.uk This includes, for each Performance Standard, a list of useful references and websites and some self-assessment questions for landlords.

We have commissioned good practice guidance for social landlords on gathering service users' views of service quality. This practical guidance for landlords will help them to meet the expectations set out in Performance Standard (GS3.1) in relation to responsiveness to service users. It will also provide examples of methods to increase customer engagement. This will be published in Autumn 2005.

Communities Scotland Tenant Participation Development Team has published a series of Tenant Participation Good Practice Briefings and in February 2004 published good practice guidance "Does Your Strategy Measure Up". Details of these are available from our website at www.communitiesscotland.gov.uk. A "Guide to Successful Tenant Participation" is currently being developed and will be published in Autumn 2005.

We will be publishing key themes from our 2005/6 inspections in summer 2006.

Pathfinder organisations inspected during 2003 and 2004

22 RSLs:

1. Aberdeenshire Housing Partnership
2. Aberdeen Soroptimist Housing Society
3. Ardenglen Housing Association
4. Atrium Homes
5. Cadder Housing Association
6. Castlehill Housing Association
7. Cernach Housing Association
8. Clydebank Housing Association
9. Cumbernauld Housing Partnership
10. Dunedin Housing Association
11. Eildon Housing Association
12. Link Group Ltd
13. Manor Estates Housing Association
14. Orkney Housing Association
15. Paragon Housing Association
16. Prospect Community Housing
17. Queens Cross Housing Association
18. Rosehill Housing Association
19. St John (Glasgow) Housing Association
20. Thistle Housing Association
21. Viewpoint Housing Association
22. Wishaw & District Housing Association

5 local authorities:

1. Angus Council
2. East Lothian Council
3. Inverclyde Council (homelessness only inspection)
4. Stirling Council (homelessness only inspection)
5. West Dunbartonshire Council

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