

P R E C *i* S

A summary series of recent research from Communities Scotland

No 114

Evaluating Scottish social landlords' progress on tenant participation

The Housing (Scotland) Act 2001 (the Act) placed new responsibilities on social landlords to engage with and involve tenants in their activities. Communities Scotland commissioned this evaluation to assess the progress that had been made by landlords since the introduction of the Act.

The main findings of the study were:

- Landlords and registered tenant organisations (RTOs) generally agree that the Act has brought about progress in tenant participation. Overall landlords have adopted a more focused and formalised approach to tenant participation activity.
- There are still a small number of landlords that do not have tenant participation strategies in place. And some strategies do not quantify the level of resources needed to implement them as required by the Housing (Scotland) Act 2001.
- There has been a decline in tenant involvement in reviewing tenant participation strategies compared to when they were initially developed.
- A wide range of methods are now being used by landlords to engage with tenants. Where options are available and tenants have been involved in agreeing them, more successful engagement is taking place.
- Despite the level of activity, tenants can find it difficult to give concrete examples of how they have influenced landlord decisions at a policy level.
- Key decisions continue to be taken by landlords without involving tenants. The level of feedback provided by landlords to tenants is often poor. And links to wider engagement structures often need to be improved.
- Although there are some excellent examples of landlords working with equality groups, practice tends to be poor.
- Many landlords are good at recording their tenant participation activity. But it is difficult to assess what the impact had been on the way they operate.
- The findings of this study suggest there is still a need for support to continue to be provided to landlords and tenants nationally. This should include sharing practical experience and lessons learned, providing additional guidance and working with landlords to develop best practice.

Background

Since the introduction of the Housing (Scotland) Act 2001 (the Act), tenants have had a statutory right to participate in the decision making process of social landlords.

Landlords are required to:

- have tenant participation strategies in place, developed in consultation with tenants, including an assessment of the resources requirements;
- maintain and publish a register of tenants groups meeting certain criteria, called registered tenants organisations (RTOs); and
- consult individual tenants and RTOs on housing and related issues that affect them.

The Act was implemented in stages. It was supported by considerable resources being made available to landlords by the Scottish Executive. A tenant participation development team was established within Communities Scotland in 2002. The team was responsible for:

- promoting the new legal requirements;
- providing advice and support to landlords;
- producing guidance;
- managing grant funding for RTOs;
- supporting engagement with tenants at a national level; and
- identifying and sharing good practice.

The team has gradually shifted its focus from supporting landlords to working with tenants' groups. Since 2005 a key focus has been developing regional structures to bring RTOs together to engage in national housing policy development.

The context

A baseline study published in 2003 found that:

- two-thirds of landlords had procedures for registering tenants' groups;
- over half had a draft or final tenant participation strategy;
- one in ten landlords had not consulted with tenants regarding strategy development; and

- consultation with equalities groups was limited.

In 2004 Communities Scotland commissioned a progress study which found that:

- the level and quality of tenant participation varied considerably;
- more work was needed in promoting participation of equalities groups, and in rural areas; and
- monitoring was the least developed area of tenant participation strategies.

An analysis of Community Scotland inspection reports between 2003 and 2007, undertaken as part of this study, identified that:

- most landlords had a tenant participation strategy in place;
- around two-thirds had made real efforts to consult their tenants;
- some landlords were not meeting their statutory duty to consult; and
- tenants were rarely given feedback on the issues they are involved in.

Analysis of 56 current tenant participation strategies in 2007 showed that:

- three-quarters provide evidence of tenant involvement in their development;
- there is a stated commitment to equalities, but little evidence of action; and
- many monitoring and evaluation arrangements are still in development.

Study findings

Landlord commitment

Most landlords felt their governing bodies were committed to involving tenants in service design and delivery. But one-third of local authorities indicated that they had experienced organisational barriers.

Where commitment to tenant participation has come from the governing body and senior staff,

it has created a supportive environment for operational staff. But the study found cases where wider organisational priorities had impacted on a landlord's commitment to tenant participation.

Impact

Generally landlords and RTOs felt the Act had resulted in progress in tenant participation. It had also helped to push it 'higher up the agenda'.

However, some smaller RSLs felt that they now had to be able to demonstrate activities that they had previously been undertaking on a more informal basis.

Organisational delivery

Landlords have resourced, supported and organised tenant participation activity in different ways. There is no right or wrong way. Organisational leadership, recognising the time it takes to gain wider staff support, and the need to work in different ways are the essential ingredients to effective organisational delivery.

Resources and support

The study found that most landlords have identified the resources that are needed to implement their tenant participation strategies. But some have not done so as required by the Act. Nor have all landlords involved tenants in agreeing the level of resources to be allocated to tenant participation.

The vast majority of RTOs indicated that the support they received from their landlord was helpful in assisting them to meet their objectives. But it was difficult in some cases to quantify these resources or make useful comparisons between the level of financial and in kind support provided by landlords.

Tenant participation strategies

Around 80 per cent of landlords had tenant participation strategies by March 2003, as required. All who responded to our survey now had strategies in place. But we did identify a small number of landlords that still do not have tenant participation strategies.

Most landlords indicated that they had given the opportunity for some or all of their tenants to be involved in developing their initial strategy. Many landlords have since reviewed their initial

strategies. But there does appear to have been a fall off in landlords involving tenants in this process.

Three-quarters of RTOs responding to the survey indicated they had been consulted by their landlord about the key issues they wanted to influence. But only 60 per cent had been asked how they wanted to be consulted in the future.

The level of detail and ambition in their tenant participation strategies varies between landlords. Some, particularly RSLs, felt that the level of activity they undertake is not reflected in their strategy as a result of the more informal approach they have adopted.

Working with RTOs

Communities Scotland maintains a central database of RTOs based on information supplied and updated by landlords. This suggests that there were a total 616 RTOs in mid 2007. However, the study found discrepancies. Eight per cent of RTOs that were contacted advised that they had disbanded or proved to be uncontactable. This suggests that, whilst the number of RTOs will regularly change, landlord registers may not always be up to date.

There also appears to be some evidence of differences in the registration criteria and support being offered by landlords. Some tenants' organisations indicated that they had decided not to register as a result of the level of bureaucracy involved.

Wider participation arrangements

Many landlords are offering a menu of participation options to their tenants. In the case of RSLs this often involves committee membership. For some RSLs this is often seen as central to tenant participation. But Communities Scotland's guidance makes it clear that other options must be open to tenants. The study found examples of tensions arising between tenant committee members and other tenant participation arrangements.

Participation options regularly used by landlords include registers of interested tenants, working groups and tenant conferences. Specific and more informal approaches appear to be particularly successful. However, being able to demonstrate real influence is critical to sustaining tenant involvement.

Many landlords are also recognising the link between tenant participation and wider community development activity. As better relationships develop between landlords and tenants, tenants express their views more openly.

Wider community engagement

Tenant participation activity is being developed alongside a much wider agenda to involve communities in decision making. This presents challenges, particularly for local authorities. Whilst some examples of good practice were identified, the study found that some landlords were experiencing difficulties in making effective linkages across their organisation.

Landlords' policies and practices

Just under three-quarters of RTOs responding to the survey indicated that their landlord had consulted them over key issues they wanted to influence. And 60 per cent advised they had been involved in reviewing these policies or practices.

But many RTOs found it difficult to give concrete examples of how they had influenced the way in which their landlord delivered its services. Lack of feedback was highlighted as a significant issue with only half of RTOs indicating that their landlord had let them know how their views had been taken into account.

Measuring impacts

Both landlords and RTOs felt that progress was being made with tenant participation. Whilst many landlords are measuring the activities they are involved in, there is little evidence of the effectiveness or impact that these activities are having.

Equality issues

The study found examples of good practice of landlords involving equalities groups in the development or implementation of their tenant participation policies. However, these were the exception and very few landlords had engaged with these.

Recommendations

The report recommends that there is a need for ongoing support to be provided nationally to landlords if tenant participation is to "remain on the agenda".

It suggests a number of areas where further guidance could be developed and best practice information disseminated. It also proposes supporting a group of landlords to undertake a

pilot project in engaging with equality groups. This should be documented and disseminated to a wider audience.

About the study

The study was undertaken between January and October 2007 by ODS Consulting Ltd.

It involved a desktop review, postal surveys and case studies. The contextual review explored the legal and best practice framework for tenant participation. It also included an analysis of the themes emerging from Communities Scotland inspection reports and an assessment of a sample of tenant participation strategies.

A postal survey was issued to all social landlords and RTOs. The survey updated a previous baseline study and sought to identify progress being made and any barriers perceived.

Finally, ten landlord case studies explored experiences in greater detail in different environments across the country.

Related Communities Scotland research

Engaging with tenants nationally – a consultation study, Communities Scotland Precis 80 and report 66, March 2006.

A good practice framework for tenant participation in Scotland, Communities Scotland Precis 35 and report 43, March 2004

Analysis of the baseline study of tenant participation, Communities Scotland Precis 28 and report 25, October 2003.

The way forward

The report has highlighted a number of recommendations. The Scottish Government will consider how to support the implementation of the findings.

Further information

For more information about the study, contact Michael Boal by telephone 0131 479 5278 or email, michael.boal@communitiesScotland.gsi.gov.uk.

The report is available on our website, www.communitiesScotland.gov.uk.