

Summary report

# Understanding tenant involvement

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In September 2008 Ipsos MORI were commissioned to undertake extensive qualitative research, discussion groups and in-depth interviews with tenants in social housing, including those currently living in supported housing. This work was funded by the Tenant Services Authority.

The overall objective of the research was to deliver a detailed understanding of the attitudes social housing tenants have towards involvement in housing management and decision making. The emphasis of the research was to engage with tenants who were unlikely to be involved in civic life, as well as those who were civically 'engaged' and have experience of participating in community life. The 'engaged' people we spoke to were involved in one or more of a range of community activities, but these were not necessarily related to their housing.

This report outlines what the tenants we spoke to had to say, using verbatim quotes to bring their perspectives to life. This report moves beyond description and reportage offering practical recommendations for increasing tenant involvement in the future.

# Policy context

- Citizen empowerment is fast becoming a major policy area for all government departments and public services providers. This has culminated in the recent Community Empowerment White Paper, *Communities in Control* (2008), and the newly reinforced Duty to Involve, Consult and Inform
- Over the past decade, citizen empowerment has increasingly come to be seen as both an end in itself and an integral mechanism for delivering effective public services tailored to the needs of those who use them
- This shift in the public policy landscape is also reflected in the housing sector where significant policy changes have taken place in recent years. As a result of the Cave Review (2006) and the consequent Housing and Regeneration Bill (2007), housing policy for social housing tenants, in particular, has undergone a change of focus. Tenant involvement in housing decision making is now perceived to be a central element of good service delivery
- The Housing and Regeneration Bill (2007) has established the Tenant Services Authority (TSA) – the new housing regulator. One key objective for the TSA will be ‘to ensure that tenants of social housing have the opportunity to be involved in its management’
- Recent research, such as that undertaken by the National Consumer Council (2006)<sup>1</sup>, indicates that while tenants understand the value of involvement, they are cynical about how it’s undertaken. Citizenship Survey 2008 data shows, however, that tenants want greater opportunities to participate in effective decision making and more varied ways of getting involved in decisions regarding their housing

<sup>1</sup> National Consumer Council (2006). *What Tenants Want*. A report by the Tenant Involvement Commission.

# Key findings

## Tenants want to be more involved in housing management

- Many tenants express interest in being more involved in housing management but they also question the influence their own involvement can have, leading some to be indifferent towards involvement opportunities
- Most of the tenants irrespective of being engaged or not, consider involvement to be a social good in itself and something to be encouraged by housing providers. But many are unlikely to get involved themselves despite this
- While tenants value involvement in itself, most value it as a mechanism for pushing up the overall quality of housing provision. This is particularly true of tenants who were dissatisfied with their housing provider. However, this statement was more likely to be based on perception, not actual experience
- However, there were a minority of examples among 'engaged tenants' that being involved in housing management has had a positive impact on the overall standard of the housing and services delivered by their landlord. Where this is the case, tenant satisfaction with their landlord is improved as a result

## Involvement and satisfaction appear to be linked

- Our research suggests a tangible link - but not necessarily a causality - between satisfaction and involvement in general, reinforcing a key finding from the Ipsos MORI report, Searching for the Impact of Empowerment (2008), which shows citizen involvement has a positive impact on key quality of life measures such as social capital
- From the evidence presented, housing providers who are most keen to involve their tenants in housing management also tended to have the most satisfied tenants
- Our research also indicates that tenants with a good relationship with their provider were also more likely to feel empowered and involved. By contrast, tenants who were particularly dissatisfied with their landlord were more likely to feel disempowered and lacking in influence

## **Involvement, power, and influence**

- Feelings of power and influence among tenants also appear related to how tenants perceive involvement. It is strongly felt that involvement must offer genuine transfers of power to service users
- Many tenants expressed a lack of interest in getting involved in housing management because they strongly felt their housing provider would not be interested in their views, or would not concede any power to them. This led particularly disengaged tenants to be disillusioned with participation in general
- It is significant, however, that this was not typical of tenants with experience of tenant involvement. These tenants were far more likely to be advocates of involvement for a number of reasons. Most notably:
  - their experience of involvement challenged negative preconceptions of who actually gets involved (ie they are made up of people who actually want to make a positive difference to society not just be nosey)
  - they generally felt that they did have some influence
  - it brought them closer to their housing provider

## **Barriers to involvement: may not be needed if service is already good**

- Our research suggests that a perceived lack of need for involvement in housing decision making is a barrier for some tenants. A minority of tenants did not get involved because they were already satisfied with the service they were receiving. As such, non-involvement sometimes represents the success of service provision and not a failure on the part of housing providers to get local tenants involved in decision making

## **Barriers to involvement: a sense of disengagement**

- Overall, the majority of tenants feel disempowered irrespective of being engaged or not. Supported housing tenants proved to be a strong exception to the rule. Many of these tenants had involvement mechanisms provided for them as an element of their specialised housing provision. They were invariably intimately engaged in these mechanisms and supported them

- For those tenants who did feel disempowered, this appears to be based on strong perceptions of what tenants groups do and who is in them. In practical terms this means that tenants frequently overestimate the amount of time required to be 'involved'
- Many tenants thought their disengagement from housing management decision making was a reflection of their wider marginalisation in society in general. The importance of this being that, in the context of involvement and empowerment, housing exacerbates wider feelings of disempowerment

### **Barriers to involvement: justification for disengagement and the stigma of being involved**

- Some tenants also spoke of a stigma being attached to those who become involved in civic activities who are generally perceived by fellow tenants to be 'nosey' and 'busybodies'. This was argued to be a deterrent preventing some tenants from getting more involved in housing decision making
- Many tenants said that there was a stigma attached to involvement within their local communities, specifically the perception

that being involved means tenants must be 'busybodies' who interfere in other people's business. This was, however, more true of disengaged tenants who claim this deterred them from becoming involved

- Some tenants exaggerate the homogeneity of the 'active citizen' to justify why they do not get involved on the basis of feeling excluded, and frequently resort to perceptions of the stereotypical 'do-gooder' who is white, fairly well-off and retired
- Tenant perceptions of those who get involved in housing management were very different depending on levels of engagement. Disengaged tenants were far more likely to think negatively of those who get involved while valuing involvement itself
- This odd paradox or inconsistency highlights a central finding. Many of the tenants who are not involved frequently resort to justifications for their own disengagement
- This highlights a pressure – perceived by these tenants – to get involved in housing management. But it also highlights a gap between what people say and what people do. For example, while almost all tenants think people should have more of a say in how their housing is managed, the majority do not actually

get involved themselves, and often resort to justifications to explain why that is

## **Barriers to involvement: lack of knowledge**

- The majority of tenants participating in the research believed that there are not enough opportunities to get involved in decision making in general, including housing management
- Tenants generally have low awareness and understanding of the meaning of involvement and engagement. This was evident in their lack of knowledge of the language of engagement, and their lack of experiences of structured involvement (eg board membership of a housing association, membership of tenants association). These are significant barriers to increasing the number of tenants interested and involved in housing decision making
- Many tenants had difficulty conceptualising what tenant involvement was and the purpose of it. While this was less true of our 'engaged tenants', only a minority of this group of tenants can be said to be knowledgeable and/or have a very good understanding of involvement opportunities in general. Only a small group of supported

housing tenants could be considered very knowledgeable in this context

- Importantly, most tenants lack an understanding of the involvement opportunities and mechanisms open to local people, often reducing involvement to tenants associations

## **Need for realism: not all tenants will get involved**

- Our research suggests that there is a 'ceiling' on how many tenants will realistically get involved. While tenants are generally interested in being more involved in housing management, housing providers also need to be realistic about how involved tenants actually want to be
- To some extent, this 'ceiling to participation' is related to levels of satisfaction with their housing provider and local environment. It is reasonable – based on this research – to suggest that some tenants do not get involved in housing management because they are content with their current situation and do not feel they need to get involved to improve their lot
- The research also suggests that only a small proportion of tenants would be likely to show a sustained commitment to active participation reflecting a wider trend in research surrounding

civic participation. This is not because tenant involvement is not important to tenants. But it rightly suggests that it is less important than other key quality of life measures

- For the majority of tenants, the ideal model involvement would be a representative body or group who represented their interests with the provision that tenants had real control and influence over the representative body

## **The link between involvement and satisfaction with landlord**

- Our research also suggests that in exemplary cases where involvement practices were strong (TMOs, supported housing), 'good' involvement can improve tenants' understanding of engagement practices and their levels of overall satisfaction with the landlord

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