

What Tenants Want

Report of the Tenant Involvement Commission

Chaired by Ed Mayo

Executive summary

Housing associations are an energetic and vital part of today's economy and society. They provide a home for around five million people across England. They are the fastest growing voluntary organisations in the country, but also significant businesses in their own right. Most, from largest to smallest, take real pride in their service and demonstrate a visible commitment to the well-being of their tenants.

But how do their tenants see them? And what do tenants want? This was the focus of the work of the Tenant Involvement Commission. The Commission drew on a consultation with all those in the housing world, which attracted 120 responses, and an innovative 'deliberative forum' with around a hundred tenants, which took place in Leeds.

A range of examples of best practice emerged from what associations are already doing, ranging from offering £15 where the housing association or its contractors fails to turn up during the agreed two-hour appointment slot, linking staff pay to customer satisfaction ratings through to giving the power to a tenants' panel (randomly recruited) to investigate and tell their group board how they should involve tenants in governance and in service delivery.

But from tenants, the headline message for associations is stark: you must put your own house in order to deliver more responsive services and to give tenants more choice and more say over their homes and neighbourhoods. What tenants want is that housing associations should:

1. Get the basics right and go the extra mile
2. Give us a choice
3. Make involvement personal
4. Be accountable

Getting the basics right and going the extra mile

- Tenants want their associations to "get the basics right" as a landlord before broadening the scope of their service.
- Community is important to many tenants and there is good scope for action by housing associations. But this must not distract from their service as a landlord.
- The dream landlord provides a strong, basic service and goes the "extra mile" in offering choice to tenants and listening to their needs.

- In contrast, housing associations are often perceived to be paternalistic or, even patronising, in their approach to tenants. Some tenants speak of a “get what you are given” culture within their association and the contractors it employs.
- Black and minority ethnic tenants are significantly less satisfied (67%) with the overall service of their landlord than white British tenants (78%).
- Tenants are far clearer about their responsibilities than about their rights. They struggle to name the rights they have, beyond the right to occupy and the right to exchange.
- Very few tenants know how their housing association compares to others or how to find out. But they are interested in this, and finding out can help them set their expectations and gauge their satisfaction with what they get.
- Tenants recognise the resource limitations and are not asking for it all. They stress that customers should not pay extra for what should be the core service, but some would like the choice to pay more for additional services. Popular choices for this are opportunities to buy a stake in their existing home or to purchase another home, additional security, and more modern and individualised kitchens and bathrooms. Others would like the option but think in reality they would be unlikely to pay for extras, often because they think they would be unable to afford it.
- Some housing associations want to adopt more sophisticated pricing mechanisms to charge for additional individualised services. Tenants and housing associations want to see this done in a way that does not marginalise vulnerable groups.

Give us a choice

- There is a huge appetite for choice. Many tenants feel that they have few choices. More than nine out of every ten, drawing on those present at the Tenants’ Forum, say that they would like to have more choice in the service that their landlord provides.
- Housing associations tend to focus on choice based lettings, and are cautious about wider choice. Tenants, in contrast, have lots of ideas on the choices they would like, from appointment times and picking contractors through to choice based kitchens.
- Tenants are interested in becoming involved and see the value of it ‘on paper’. However, many report apathy about doing anything in reality, unless their housing association can convince them that getting involved matters and can make a difference.
- A minority of tenants are keen to be actively involved in decision making. Many more want to be involved when there is a key decision to be taken that will affect them directly.
- Tenants want opportunities to be involved that are convenient to them and give them a personal as well as a collective say.

Make involvement personal

Be accountable

- Tenants know how to complain to their housing association – even if few of those who have complained are satisfied. But few know how to complain to an external body about their housing association, or, know what to do if their complaint to their landlord is not addressed.
- The key performance indicators set by the Housing Corporation are considered to be very good. Tenants also suggest that associations monitor how well they communicate with tenants and incidents of anti-social behaviour and complaints.
- Tenants believe that it is important to have tenants on the management boards of housing associations. They are seen to bring a tenants' perspective to the discussions of the board.

A new relationship

Tenants want good quality services, but the relationship they want with housing associations goes beyond normal customer service as it opens up an element of partnership. There is a need to renew and refresh the relationship between landlord and tenant, based on customer service, mutuality and business success.

The headline recommendation we have for housing associations is to take up a new ten-point *Customer First Plan*. Many are already well on the way, but we ask all associations to re-examine the quality of their relationship with their customers.

The Plan is based on a:

1. Service pledge: including improved market intelligence, choice and personalised services.
2. Accountability pledge: including a choice between minimum standards of tenant involvement, which are:
 - o at least one quarter of board membership open to tenants, or
 - o an empowered residents' panel that the board listens to, or
 - o regular option appraisals on how tenants might be more involved in the management of their homes and community facilities, including the possibility of tenant management.

To support this, we recommend that the:

1. National Housing Federation:
 - o develop a code of tenant involvement that can interact with the Federation's *Code of governance and Model of accountability*;
 - o promote a plain language leaflet for tenants and leaseholders of their rights and responsibilities, as a resource for housing associations;
 - o work with the Housing Corporation to identify the resources to review the current standard satisfaction survey (STATUS) to ensure that it is focused on the issues that matter to tenants and to identify common drivers for customer satisfaction.

2. Department for Communities and Local Government set a new primary, statutory objective to “promote and protect the interests of consumers of housing.”
3. Department for Communities and Local Government, Audit Commission and Housing Corporation reduce the burden of regulation by advancing practical options for deregulation for housing associations that are in line with the *Customer First Plan*.
4. Law Commission (a) explore the case for establishing a common right to manage across tenants of housing associations, local authorities and non-housing associations in receipt of grant; (b) ensure that housing providers operate under a general duty to treat tenants fairly.
5. Department for Communities and Local Government work with the Housing Corporation and English Partnerships to review how funding, including for the development of new homes, and other support, can be linked to the *Customer First Plan* approach.

Supporting Sponsors

Bradford Community Housing Trust

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The Tenant Involvement Commission was initiated as an independent group by the National Housing Federation, working over the period of April to September 2006 with the support of a secretariat based at the Federation.

To find out more about the work of the Tenant Involvement Commission visit the National Housing Federation website at www.housing.org.uk or ring 020 7067 1010.

The National Housing Federation represents 1400 not-for-profit, independent housing associations who together provide 2 million homes for around 5 million people in England.

NATIONAL HOUSING FEDERATION

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