The relationship between social landlords and tenants’ organisations

This research investigated how social landlords resource and regulate tenants’ organisations in their area (‘tenants’ is used here to describe both tenants and other residents). The aim was to improve understanding of the relationships between social landlords and such organisations. It took place in the context of increasing emphasis by the Government and regulators of social housing on the need for effective engagement with social tenants and other users of public services. The research also looked at how resources and regulation affected participation by tenants from black and minority ethnic communities. The researchers found:

- Tenants’ organisations have a variety of tasks and roles, not all of which will necessarily fit with their landlords’ expectations. Where the landlord is paying some of the groups’ expenses, conflict can be painful.

- Tenant participation is far from being absorbed into mainstream practice in social housing organisations.

- There appears to be a clear relationship between the amount spent on tenant participation and its effectiveness.

- The rules and regulations social landlords make for tenants’ groups are generally straightforward, but trust can break down where agreement cannot be reached on what the regulations mean in practice.

- Equal opportunities is an under-developed area of tenant participation – both landlords and tenants tend to rely on assertions of ‘equal treatment for all’. For black and minority ethnic tenants, in particular, many existing tenant participation structures may have little relevance.

- The relationship between social landlords and local tenants’ organisations can be very productive. It can also be confrontational. Disagreements over policies coupled with landlords’ power over resources can lead to long-term breakdown of relations and great bitterness between the parties.

- Trust is strongest, and relationships most productive, where the landlord is seen to be ‘fair’ – even where there is disagreement on some issues. The poorest relationships are those where tenants’ groups feel unfairly treated, and where they have had no recourse to an independent third party as mediator. Tenants’ groups in Scotland were hopeful that the new ‘Right to Participation’, with a central register of accredited tenants’ groups, would overcome this problem.
The role of tenants’ organisations

The research studied tenants’ organisations (locally based tenants and residents’ associations and wider federations) because these have traditionally been the foundation of tenant participation. In recent years, work with local tenants’ groups has been supplemented, and sometimes supplanted, by more market-research-orientated methods of finding out what tenants want from their landlord. The most frequently reported activity of tenants’ groups is representing tenants at meetings with the landlord, followed by administration (of the group itself) and organising social events. They have a clear, though often overlooked, role in community capacity-building, which can include advocacy for vulnerable tenants who may otherwise go unheard and social activities. Tenants’ group members can be both ‘volunteers’ in a traditional sense and also political activists – many local councillors started out as tenants’ representatives.

Tenants’ groups can be empowering in a number of ways, both for individuals and the wider community. They can enable people to learn new skills, and provide social events and opportunities for local residents to get out of the house and meet people. It can be incredibly empowering for isolated people to find others sharing the same problems. It is often the case that it is not until people get together that issues become articulated as ‘problems’. And of course it is much easier, and often more effective, to take action as a group than as an individual.

This research looked at two sorts of collective organisation – tenants’ federations and tenants’/residents’ associations. These organisations share both the advantages of most collective community groups, but also most of the disadvantages. These may include:

- Lack of resources. To be effective, groups need both simple things, like somewhere to meet, and money to pay for the group’s activities. Trying to get hold of these resources can take a great deal of time and energy, often diverting the group from its original purpose.
- Lack of skilled support. Without skilled help, groups can find themselves restricted to small-scale activity but there is a fine balance between support that helps and empowers groups and that which simply ‘takes over’. This can cause resentment amongst group members who may suddenly feel they have nothing left to do.
- Overwork amongst members. This problem was reported by almost all tenants’ groups. Research amongst voluntary groups in general shows that many volunteers are people who already have busy lives. Even retired people involved in tenants’ groups find that the demands of the work keep on growing. Ironically, members may find they are too busy to go out and recruit more people to share the workload.
- Internal disagreement. Factionalism is rife amongst voluntary groups, especially where groups have social ties within them, or where the group has been unsuccessful in some of its activities. Because of this, collective organisations can be positively disempowering for both members and ‘outsiders’. Black and minority ethnic tenants, in particular, may perceive a group as being for white people only.
- Loss of independence. Groups may find that either the whole group or some of its members have been incorporated into the landlord’s structures, thereby losing its independence.

Is tenant participation standard practice?

Although most social landlords have a ‘paper commitment’ to tenant participation, this doesn’t always follow through to all parts of the organisation. The research looked at whether commitments made as part of tenant participation initiatives were known about and supported throughout the organisation as a whole. Often they weren’t. For example, fewer than half the tenants’ groups who were aware of regeneration initiatives in their area had been consulted about them.

Landlords could benefit from ‘reality checking’ their perceptions, policies and procedures with tenants – for example, the research found that far more landlords thought that ‘they involved tenants as partners’ than did the tenants themselves. Whilst almost all landlords perceived themselves as respecting the independence of tenants’ groups, almost half the tenants’ groups disagreed. Tenants’ groups were generally supportive of their landlords’ tenant participation initiatives, particularly where these involved specialist tenant participation staff. At the same time, groups appeared more sceptical about the landlords’ achievements, particularly in the area of resources.
Resourcing tenant participation

There appears to be a strong relationship between the amount of money, staff and other resources allocated to tenant participation, and its effectiveness. Those landlords spending a higher proportion of their income on tenant participation appeared to be doing a wider variety of different tenant participation activities, communicating better with tenants, involving a wider range of people, and being more effective at incorporating tenant participation as standard practice. Notably, these landlords recognised that tenant participation could not always be ‘controlled’ and that it would bring change to the organisation itself. The willingness to commit more resources may have arisen from the underlying trusting relationship with tenants.

Resources can also cause conflict between landlords and tenants – primarily because tenants’ organisations don’t feel they have enough money (or other resources) to be effective. Some tenants’ groups were angry that members had to use personal money to keep their group going. Resources can also acquire political overtones, with tenants sometimes believing that withdrawal of resources was used to ‘punish’ tenants’ organisations which have become too challenging. The relative wealth of a social landlord compared with a tenants’ group creates a power imbalance which can make a nonsense of partnership working.

Regulating tenant participation

The relationship between landlord and tenants’ group is usually based on the landlord agreeing to ‘recognise’ the group in exchange for the group agreeing to adopt a formal constitution and democratic practices. This process is usually fairly straightforward.

Although nearly all social landlords report that they have some formally recognised tenants’ groups, there is incredible variation in these groups’ perceived role within, and value to, the landlord organisation, and in the extent to which groups are perceived to have a role at all. In many cases, ‘recognition’ is largely a historical practice, and the bureaucratic model it imposes on volunteers simply a mirror of the landlord’s own structures. By contrast, those landlords without any formal recognition procedures could be equally problematic for groups – although this approach may seem easygoing on the surface, the group has no way of knowing whether it has ‘got it right’.

A recognised group will usually have the right to apply for a small grant – if the landlord gives one. The research did not find any other real benefit of the recognition process (to either party), as informal understandings about which groups will be consulted tend to be equally important in practice. Again, the power imbalance between landlords and tenants’ groups makes ‘de-recognition’ reasonably simple for a landlord. Many landlords also have parallel consultation structures, allowing recognised groups to be side-stepped if necessary. Where problems like these were reported, they caused great bitterness, and have the potential to sour relationships for many years. These problems have been addressed in Scotland, and there may be a case for a similar ‘Right to Participate’ on the part of recognised English and Welsh groups.

Equal opportunities in tenant participation

Most of the landlords and tenants’ organisations interviewed declared that they ‘treated people equally’, but very few took any positive action to make that statement a reality. 77 per cent of the tenants’ groups returning the survey had an equal opportunities policy, but less than 40 per cent had received any information or training about equal opportunities from their landlord. Despite this, landlords often complained that tenants’ groups did not represent minorities. Few landlords took any action to widen participation in landlord-led participation activities.

Staffed tenants’ federations had a more sophisticated approach to equal opportunities than other tenants’ organisations, and provided better access to services through making buildings accessible to disabled people, translation services etc. Federations were more likely to have provided training or information on equal opportunities to their affiliated groups.

The research looked specifically at the opportunities provided for black and minority ethnic tenants to get involved in tenant participation activities and tenants’ groups. However, despite some good examples, the research found very little general evidence of effective practice in this area.

Landlords’ approaches to tenant participation

The most effective tenant participation seems to be happening in landlord organisations which take a pragmatic rather than an ideological approach to tenant participation methods, for example using a range of approaches rather than speaking only to established tenants’ groups or relying exclusively on market-research techniques, such as surveys or focus
groups. Tenants and residents are both individual and collective ‘consumers’ of housing. They have an interest both in their own home, and in the neighbourhood as a whole, and inevitably the two are interdependent. Landlords’ arrangements for tenant participation therefore need to cover issues relating to both the home and the wider environment.

The ability of tenants’ groups or activists to represent the wider community was an issue for a number of landlords. In some cases, the landlord felt that this was an important role which tenants were fulfilling. In other cases, the landlord felt (often strongly) that tenant participation needed to be restructured to ensure greater representativeness.

Two other related issues were also important – tenants’ groups’ independence from the landlord, and the ability of the groups to engage with non-housing related issues. Again, although some landlords were happy to treat tenants’ groups as independent community groups, others were clear that groups should work in partnership with the landlord, and only on housing-related issues.

Conclusions
The same key issues came up throughout the research and all concerned the building of trust between landlords and tenants’ organisations. Much of this work inevitably falls on landlords, and demands a balance between designing structures which require groups to be inclusive and democratic but which also take account of the need for groups to fulfil their many roles – some of which do not engage the landlord at all.

Above all the research shows that for trust to be built, landlords need to be seen to be ‘fair’. Often the best way to ensure ‘fairness’ was to devise and operate rules and regulations (including those relating to resources) independently of either party. The research found support for the new Scottish system for doing just this, and there seems to be a compelling case for extending it to England and Wales.

About the project
The research was undertaken by Liz Millward (Centre for Comparative Housing Research, De Montfort University), Barbara Reid (South Bank University), Joan Beckford and Alethea Dougal (Croydon Council). It involved three complementary methods:

- Postal questionnaires sent to approximately 200 local tenants’ groups (in England) and approximately 40 tenants’ federations (in England, Scotland and Wales). Contact details were found through tenants’ networks and organisations, as there is no national database of extant groups. 90 tenants’ groups and 30 federations completed questionnaires, divided evenly between Registered Social Landlords (RSLs) and local authority landlords, with an even geographical spread (but with a bias towards urban areas).

- A sample of 40 RSLs and 40 local authorities. For the RSLs, the researchers analysed the responses to a survey on tenant participation carried out by the Housing Corporation and, for local authorities, looked at Housing Investment Programme (HIP) forms. In some cases, these included comments from tenants.

- Six case studies, including one Housing Action Trust, one housing association (plus a smaller number of interviews at a second housing association) and four local authorities. Case studies were done in England, Scotland and Wales. Additional interviews were carried out with a range of representatives from national tenants’ organisations, black and minority ethnic tenants’ organisations and tenants’ training and support organisations.

How to get further information
The research team has produced a ‘toolkit’ offering tenants and landlords a framework to evaluate and improve their participation arrangements. Encouraging participation: A toolkit for tenants and social landlords, by Joan Beckford, Alethea Dougal, Liz Millward and Barbara Reid, is published for the Foundation by the Chartered Institute of Housing (ISBN 1 903208 28 9, price £35 via JRFor £20 for tenants’ groups and residents’ associations from the CIH, email: pubs@cih.org.