

Tenant participation in supported housing

Supported housing tenants are among the most vulnerable in society. Most hold assured tenancies, which give them the same housing rights as other assured tenants, including the right to receive information and to be consulted. A report by TPAS (Wales) shows that consultation rights are often not afforded to supported housing tenants. The research found that:

- f** Many organisations do not give a high priority to tenant participation in supported housing, even though their overall aims are often to give tenants more responsibility and develop their confidence and skills.
- f** Many practitioners felt that opportunities for tenant participation were limited and that tenants were not interested.
- f** When asked, all tenants, irrespective of their support needs and the types of project they were living in, were clear that they did want a say in how their house was run and the full range of issues concerning the service they receive.
- f** Many supported housing tenants did not know they had a right to consultation and information. Tenants were often unaware of other housing rights. These were sometimes ignored by practitioners when they conflicted with the smooth running of schemes.
- f** Many tenants found information from housing associations and managing partners difficult to understand. Non-readers were frequently given written information.
- f** Although housing management and tenant consultation responsibilities are delegated to managing partners, most support workers have little training in this area. Support workers can make or break tenant participation, but tenants were more confident about speaking out when independent support was offered.
- f** Housing associations delegating consultation responsibilities to managing partners often made no provision for separate budgets for tenant participation, or for detailed reviewing and monitoring of the process.
- f** Barriers between supported housing tenants and the wider community were decreased by involvement in local tenants' groups, housing conferences and training events.
- f** Successful participation depended on committed staff, independent training and support for tenants and an emphasis on developing a range of informal, tenant-led structures.

Introduction

Most tenants of supported housing in Wales and England hold assured tenancies and have the rights to consultation and information as identified in the Tenants' Guarantee, issued by Housing for Wales and the Housing Corporation. The Tenants' Guarantee requires housing associations to consult their tenants and actively encourage tenant participation in association affairs.

Attitudes to participation

Many organisations perceive tenant participation in supported housing as a desirable, but non-essential issue, to be tackled after more pressing needs are met:

"Tenant participation is something we will look at when we are over our current staff/organisation/project crisis."

At the same time, practitioners see their work as "Enabling tenants to take charge of their lives", and "Giving tenants more responsibility", statements which directly complement the aims of tenant participation.

Many practitioners felt that tenants were not interested in having their say, being preoccupied with other problems. Yet when tenants were asked if they wanted a say, they were clear and positive:

"Having a say in how things are run just seems like common sense to me."

"We are having a new house manager. We want a say in who comes in. We want to meet them and be in on interviews."

Tenants' responses were consistent across the range of support needs and types of accommodation studied.

Practitioners sometimes felt that opportunities for tenants to have a say were limited. Yet tenants listed a wide range of issues covering house/scheme, support/staffing, and general policy issues concerning both managing partners and housing associations. This response was consistent across the range of tenants interviewed.

It is apparent that the nature of people's support needs, the type of project they occupy, and their length of stay, do not have a significant effect on tenants' wishes to have a say in the full range of services they receive.

Tenants' rights

Tenants of supported housing holding assured tenancies have the same rights as those in general needs housing. However, tenants consistently gave

examples of how their tenancy rights were not being upheld, and were often unaware of their rights.

"I have never been consulted about anything since I've been living here."

"Thank you for telling me about all these rights I've got. I didn't realise I had any of them until today."

The research showed that although support workers regularly have housing management responsibilities delegated to them, they frequently come from non-housing backgrounds and are not provided with training on housing rights or participation. Some workers acknowledged that they occasionally had to ignore tenants' rights when they conflicted with the smooth running of schemes.

"I wouldn't let them have people sleeping over. It would cause problems and jealousies with the other tenants."

"I know they can't be forced to leave without a court order but I bank on them not knowing that. If there is trouble I threaten them with having to leave by the end of the week."

Workers highlighted conflicts between the requirements of funders and the rights of tenants:

"We tell our tenants they have permanent tenancies. The scheme is classed as temporary, but our tenants hold assured tenancies so we don't see we have the right to ask them to leave. But Housing for Wales only gives us SNMA (revenue funding) on the understanding that 75 per cent of our tenants move on each year."

The current assured tenancy agreement does not include the variety of options appropriate to the different needs of supported housing schemes.

Information

Many tenants described information as too long or boring.

"I get the stuff and try to read it, but I can't take it in."

Essential information like tenants' handbooks and complaints procedures are often unread. Non-readers are frequently given information in written form. Some tenants and support workers feel there is an overloading of information at the start of tenancies, and it would be helpful to build regular information sessions into support packages.

Some of the best examples of information were found where tenants had been involved in producing summaries in bullet point form.

The role of support workers

Workers acknowledged that their inevitably unequal relationship with tenants gave workers a powerful role in discussions.

"On choosing colours for the lounge we got them to agree. I feel we manipulated them."

Some workers felt threatened by the process of participation, while others were very positive, but acknowledged that they needed help in the process:

"There's a wealth of wasted talent waiting to come out. We need ideas to motivate them."

Observations showed that when support workers were enthusiastic, tenants were more likely to attend events. However, meetings of tenants worked best with an independent facilitator and without workers present. Tenants expressed their views more freely, without deferring to workers or feeling disloyal.

Support workers played a crucial role throughout the project, encouraging and enabling tenants to attend events, and acting as carers and advocates at conferences and seminars.

The relationship between housing associations and managing partners

Six of the seven housing associations involved in the project delegated responsibility for tenant participation to managing partners, along with day to day management responsibilities. But few budgets agreed between housing associations and partners included specific items to cover the cost of tenant participation and related training needs faced by managing partners. Neither did housing association review procedures include detailed guidelines, targets or monitoring arrangements for managing partners' work in this area.

Many tenants and partners commented that they would welcome more involvement by housing associations in issues such as move on, repairs, design and general liaison. It was found that where association staff were able to talk directly to tenants they could make positive contributions towards resolving issues and providing information.

Most housing associations did not encourage tenant membership of their organisations. However, two did, and one had a supported housing tenant on its committee.

There were some examples of housing associations beneficially involving supported housing tenants and practitioners in their general needs participation events and strategies. One association held a day conference for both general and supported housing tenants, with specialist workshops and presentations on supported housing issues. Another held a consultation day for managing partners to provide input to its participation strategy and recruit representatives to a working party.

Supported housing and the community

It was found that the key to successful acceptance of supported housing tenants and schemes within communities is for tenants to take part in local activities and groups. Once people are known, much of the stigma evaporates. An exchange in a workshop illustrates this:

General needs tenant: *"We don't want these 'care in the community' people on our estate."*

Supported housing tenant: *"You're talking about me when you say that. Where am I supposed to go?"*

General needs tenant: *"Oh, I don't mean you David. I know you. You're all right."*

The project successfully encouraged supported housing tenants to attend housing conferences and general needs tenants' events, and this helped create acceptance and raise the profile of supported housing issues within the general needs tenants' movement.

Development work was carried out on one estate to encourage supported housing tenants to take part in an existing tenants' association. One supported housing tenant has now been elected on to the tenants' association committee, a first step towards building positive relationships and acceptance of the scheme within the community.

It was not easy to involve supported housing tenants in housing events. Getting in touch with individual housing schemes and tenants was difficult as there is no data base of individual schemes available. Individual supported housing schemes and their tenants are effectively hidden from the housing world.

Supported housing tenants were often excluded from involvement in organisations important to tenants, by rulings in constitutions which only allow for tenant representatives from traditional tenant participation structures.

Training and conferences often did not take account of the needs of supported housing tenants, especially non-readers and those with limited concentration.

Effective participation

The project concluded that effective participation depended on:

- training
- flexible, informal structures
- organisational commitment
- accessible information

Training

Training is needed for both tenants and practitioners on participation and rights, assertiveness, interviewing skills and equal opportunities; and linking opportunities for participation with help in developing confidence and skills. Where tenants were given the opportunity to develop skills, they were more likely to participate on a wide level.

Flexible structures

Flexible, informal structures are needed, led by tenants and suited to their needs rather than those of organisations. Traditional tenant participation structures based on formal committees and constitutions are generally not appropriate in small, scattered schemes offering temporary accommodation. Regional meetings, open to all tenants from all schemes, and combining the opportunity to socialise with participation, proved an effective way of proceeding in one organisation.

Organisational commitment

Organisational commitment was needed, supported by staff time and financial resources. Meetings worked best when independent facilitators were used.

Accessible information

Information should be both accessible, and geared to the specific needs of tenants. One group of tenants produced effective summaries of information with the help of staff. Two groups produced their own 'Terms of reference'. One organisation produced information on audio and video tapes.

About the study

The project involved a detailed study of seven supported housing schemes in Wales. These included a wide range of support needs and provision, and differing types of accommodation and lengths of stay. Schemes managed via a management agreement with a partner, and directly by a housing association, were included, together with projects with some history of tenant

participation and those with little or no experience. The research included interviews with a sample of 51 tenants, managing partner and housing association representatives. A research seminar was held to gather information from service users and providers, and a series of workshops took place at housing conferences.

Development work included a number of training sessions for participants, covering tenants' rights and participation issues and opportunities. Detailed development projects were carried out with four organisations covering learning disabilities, people with mental health problems, young single people, and women suffering abuse. Two further schemes were studied where participation structures were already in place. The work was carried out by Ashley Williams and Ruth Radley, TPAS (Wales), and Monica Keeble, Housing Consultant.

Further Information.

For further information about this project contact Ashley Williams on 01222 237303, or Monica Keeble on 01656 841625.

The full report, *It Seems Like Common Sense To Me: Supported housing tenants having a say*, is published by TPAS (Wales). To obtain a copy, please send £7.50 to TPAS (Wales), Transport House, 1 Cathedral Road, Cardiff CF1 9SD.

Related Findings

The following *Findings* look at related issues:

Housing

- 133** The feasibility of 'Residents' democracy' (Nov 94)
- 135** Housing management, community care and CCT (Jan 95)
- 148** The relationship between housing benefit and community care (Jun 95)

Social care

- 66** Housing and support for people with learning difficulties (Apr 95)
- 74** Health and housing: the extent of inter-agency working (Nov 95)
- 79** Housing and mental health care needs of Asian people (Jan 96)
- 81** Housing, support and the rights of people with learning difficulties (Mar 96)

For further details of these and other *Findings*, please contact Sally Corrie, Publications Officer, on 01904 629241.



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