

Training session 03

Resident panels

Version 01 / March 2023

These notes are part of a series of 8 training sessions

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What are resident panels?

There is no one definition of a resident panel; across the social housing sector they are involved in decision-making, monitoring and scrutiny, complaints, service review, policy consideration and various other functions.

To reflect these diverse views, we have used the term “Resident Panel” to encompass a non-prescriptive set of arrangements being used to ensure accountability to residents.

The term “Resident Panel” could also be used to refer to the many neighbourhood-based groups set up by residents and communities, such as residents associations.

- Resident panels should be seen in the context of many initiatives from the 1980s onwards designed to empower residents. These initiatives have included:
- The introduction of the Right to be Consulted in 1985
- Housing co-ops, Estate Management Boards, the Right to Manage and Tenant Management Organisations
- Compulsory Competitive Tendering monitoring panels
- Tenant Compacts
- Resident groups of varying shapes and sizes (including numerous tenants and residents' associations and tenant federations)
- Residents on the boards of Registered Providers
- Resident involvement in stock transfer housing associations
- Resident owned housing associations
- Co-regulation and the Regulator of Social Housing's focus on tenant involvement and empowerment

All of these approaches have played a role in providing greater opportunities for residents to be involved in housing issues.

Why are resident panels important?

Over many years, resident panels have been progressively becoming an integral part of how landlords engage with their residents and shape their business. Where resident panels are set up well, they are a business asset to the landlord. They can:

- make considerable contributions to ensuring that services are what residents want
- play a role in supporting effective governance and decision-making, particularly in areas such as getting value for money
- be an important component in assessing performance
- provide constructive challenge to the accepted ways that things are done in order to improve them
- be particularly helpful in sorting out resident problems and issues locally and speedily
- act as service user ambassadors for the landlord.

Improving quality of life

Residents get involved with resident panels for many reasons, and there are many ways that resident panels can help to improve quality of life:

- providing a means for residents to get involved in shaping how housing services are provided
- providing a means for residents to influence how their homes and neighbourhoods are managed
- enabling residents to challenge, assess the performance of and review services
- offering a constructive forum for residents to engage with their neighbours to resolve problems and discuss ideas about how services can be improved
- enabling residents to gain skills, knowledge, experience, and confidence - both individually and as a team.

Co-regulation and the Regulatory Standards –

This section will be reviewed following changes to the Consumer Standards post Social Housing Regulation Act.

The concept of co-regulation where the regulator, the landlord, and residents would all have a role to play to ensure that landlords complied with the Regulatory Standards was introduced as part of the regulatory framework in 2010.

Despite changes to the way social housing is regulated, co- regulation remains central to the regulatory framework. The Regulator of Social Housing will continue to set Regulatory Standards that Registered Providers will be required to comply with. However the Regulator does not currently actively monitor compliance with the Regulatory Standards that relate to the landlord's service delivery (known as Consumer Standards which include the Tenant Involvement and Empowerment Standard).

Landlords are responsible for ensuring that they meet the Consumer Standards. The Regulator's role is currently limited to only intervening where failure of a Consumer Standard could lead to a risk of serious harm to residents and potential residents (known as the "serious detriment test" – this is due to be abolished).

The Tenant Involvement and Empowerment Standard 2017

The Government directs the Regulator of Social Housing regulator to set Regulatory Standards. These standards set out what is expected Registered Providers. The Tenant Involvement and Empowerment Standard sets the requirement and expectations that relate to involving and empowering residents.

Required Outcomes

Registered Providers shall ensure that tenants are given a wide range of opportunities to influence and be involved in:

- the formulation of their landlord's housing-related policies and strategic priorities
- the making of decisions about how housing-related services are delivered, including the setting of service standards
- the scrutiny of their landlord's performance and the making of recommendations to their landlord about how performance might be improved
- the management of their homes, where applicable
- the management of repair and maintenance services, such as commissioning and undertaking a range of repair tasks, as agreed with landlords, and the sharing in savings made, and
- agreeing local offers for service delivery

Specific Expectations

Registered Providers shall support their tenants to develop and implement opportunities for involvement and empowerment, including by:

- supporting their tenants to exercise their Right to Manage or otherwise exercise housing management functions, where appropriate
- supporting the formation and activities of tenant panels or equivalent groups and responding in a constructive and timely manner to them
- the provision of timely and relevant performance information to support effective scrutiny by tenants of their landlord's performance in a form which Registered Providers seek to agree with their tenants; such provision must include the publication of an annual report which should include information on repair and maintenance budgets, and
- providing support to tenants to build their capacity to be more effectively involved

Registered Providers shall consult with tenants on the scope of local offers for service delivery. This shall include how performance will be monitored, reported to and scrutinised by tenants and arrangements for reviewing these on a periodic basis.

Where Registered Providers are proposing a change in landlord for one or more of their tenants or a significant change in their management arrangements, they shall consult with affected tenants in a fair, timely, appropriate and effective manner. Registered Providers shall set out the proposals clearly and in an appropriate amount of detail and shall set out any actual or potential advantages and disadvantages (including costs) to tenants in the immediate and longer term. Registered Providers must be able to demonstrate to affected tenants how they have taken account of the consultation into account when reaching a decision.

Registered Providers shall consult tenants at least once every three years on the best way of involving tenants in the governance and scrutiny of the organisation's housing management service.

Common Principles behind resident panels

Co-regulation

Co-regulation is about residents and landlords working in partnership to self-regulate service delivery. As well as enabling residents to ensure that landlords are delivering what is expected of them in the Regulatory Standards, co-regulation can mean that residents and landlords work with each other to shape landlord decision-making and services.

Resident leadership

Resident panels can only be as effective as the residents who get involved with them. Different residents will perform different functions within Resident panel arrangements, but all those who get involved are the “resident leadership”. They need to have or develop skills and attitudes that enable them to be effective resident leaders. Resident panels need to be based on:

- development of the understanding of the resident leadership; those involved in resident panels need to understand their role, purpose and responsibilities, recognising their accountability to the other residents
- supporting resident panels to think independently, reach their own conclusions, challenge when it is appropriate to do so, and hold the landlord to account
- identification of the skills and qualities that resident panel members need to have or develop in order to be effective resident leaders; procedures that will help them develop the skills they need and assessment of their progress
- enthusiasm to learn and to engage with residents and landlords from elsewhere to gain wider knowledge

Access to all and fairness

Resident panels should be equal, diverse and inclusive. They should be accessible to all residents and operate in accordance with accepted standards of fairness and conduct. Common principles include that resident panels should:

- seek to understand and reflect the views of all of the diverse groups of residents (and other service users); it has often been the case that the traditional structure and form approaches to resident participation have favoured particular types of resident and created barriers to involvement for others
- be accessible to all residents; all residents need to be able to raise issues through their resident panel
- be open to all residents to apply to become a member of the resident panel
- be governed by codes of conduct agreed with residents that are complied with and steps taken if breached

Effective processes and adequate support

Resident panels can only be effective if there are supported by clear and effective processes and if they are adequately resourced to carry out their functions:

- having clearly defined and agreed processes that support the functions of the resident panels and that transmit learning and good practice throughout the Registered Provider
- having clarity about the objectives of the work of the resident panel
- periodically assessing the impact of the work of the resident panel and ensuring that they are delivering the intended outcomes
- ensuring that sufficient resources are available to support the resident panel's work

Achieving outcomes for residents

Ultimately resident panels must be about achieving outcomes for Residents.

Inputs The resources that go to make something happen (e.g. volunteer and staff time, financial costs)

Outputs The things that are done in order to achieve outcomes (e.g. meetings, focus groups, surveys, scrutiny exercises, a new policy, contract or leaflet)

Outcomes The changes you want to achieve that make things better for residents or prospective residents.

Outcomes can be achieved in the short, medium and long term, and they can be qualitative and quantitative:

Qualitative examples

- Residents receive better quality information
- Disabled people find the service easier to access
- Anti-social behaviour cases are resolved more effectively
- Residents feel more confident to review policies

Quantitative examples

- Number of first-time repairs increased
- More residents feel their views are taken into account
- Average time to let a home decreased
- Cost per repair decreased and so more resources available

Options for resident panels

Decision-making

Effective resident panels involved in decision-making usually need to:

- be about partnership working with the landlord
- have a means of being accountable back to the wider resident constituency
- have routes by which they can influence decision-making and services
- be about practical issues that matter to residents.

The wide array of resident panels involved in decision-making makes them difficult to define. The brief descriptions below give some impression of the diversity that exists.

Co-governance

Some resident panels involved in decision-making have been defined to have a specific involvement in governance (in some cases in the landlord's rules). They could be described as "co-governance" panels, working alongside housing association or ALMO Boards or the Council's cabinet:

Joint management

Others involve residents as part of a body that also includes other members, such as senior staff, Portfolio Holders for housing or other councillors.

Resident management and control

Resident controlled housing organisations (e.g. co-operatives and tenant management organisations) are examples of Resident Panels who manage and/or own their homes.

Advisory panels

Whilst not formally part of the governance structure, some panels have been set up to perform similar functions with direct relationships with Boards and senior staff.

Resident federations

Resident federations are a long-standing means by which residents have been represented. Usually independent of the landlord, they have had various relationships with landlords and operate in different ways.

Area and specific panels

Larger landlords often have area based resident panels that operate locally. Some housing associations formed as a result of mergers have resident panels set up in different parts of group structures. Some resident panels have been set up to consider particular service areas, such as communications, major repairs, resident involvement, diversity, and many others. Some resident panels have been set up to represent particular demographic groups in relation to landlord's residents.

Shaping services

Most landlords have panels that have been set up to enable residents to be involved in reviewing particular services. These may be permanent or temporary task and finish groups. Effective systems to review services might include:

- a systematic plan to review frontline services so that residents are clear when particular elements of the service will be reviewed
- leadership of the review by a team including residents, staff and possibly governing body members
- gathering evidence that feeds into the review (such as survey data, evidence of dissatisfaction, focus groups, the use of resident sounding boards, resident inspection and mystery shopping reports, performance data, benchmark information and information on best practice used elsewhere)
- collating this evidence in a resident friendly fashion to enable residents to challenge emerging conclusions and to enable informed debate between members of the review team
- changes to policies, procedures and systems that are then fed back to residents to show how their input made a difference

Monitoring and scrutiny

This function is carried out in many different ways in landlords. Governing bodies (Boards of housing associations and ALMOs and Cabinets in local councils) scrutinise the way their staff implement policies. Sub-committees scrutinise particular aspects of services. Various groups scrutinise performance information. External and internal auditors independently scrutinise particular activities (most notably the landlord's accounts). resident panels can be involved in many of these activities.

The Tenant Involvement and Empowerment Standard requires the production of an annual report to residents in a form agreed with residents and the new Tenant Satisfaction Measures Standard requires landlords to publish data regarding 22 indicators. These publications are a particular activity that enables resident panels to be involved in scrutiny and monitoring.

Effective resident scrutiny is driven by:

- independence from landlord governance
- there must be accountability, openness and transparency
- it must integrate with the strategic and performance management frameworks of a landlord
- there must be clear responsibilities that are agreed from the beginning
- there must be a capacity to deliver against expectations
- decisions must be made freely and based on access to a range of information from different commissioned sources
- an ability to shape the parameters of the information the landlord collects
- embedding resident scrutiny into formal performance, operation and assessment frameworks
- raising the profile of scrutiny and making as many residents aware as possible of what it is and how to get involved
- an effective approach to deciding what areas are scrutinised and what evidence will inform decisions

- establishing an appropriate recruitment process and systems for managing conflicts of interest
- agreeing scrutiny report formats and processes for conveying recommendations to the Governing Body

Collaborative resident panels

The previous examples were all about resident panels formed within one particular landlord. A further option that some residents and landlords have explored is whether residents would benefit from resident representatives coming together from different landlords in a borough or an area. Collaborative resident panels could enable residents to:

- compare, contrast and benchmark services, policies and systems in different landlords
- develop peer pressure in an area to ensure that all landlords improve their performance to the level of the best performer
- develop a greater sense of local identity and resident confidence, community pride, self-help and independence
- enable residents to have a stronger local voice with their local councils and other local service providers

Some key issues to be considered when setting up a collaborative resident panel are:

- who initiates the process?
- how will the panel be resourced and facilitated?
- what area will the panel cover?
- where will the resident representatives come from and how will they be recruited?
- what outcomes with the panel seek to achieve?

Activities that collaborative resident panels could explore include:

Service-related issues

- comparisons of service review processes and standards
- consideration of allocations and anti-social behaviour systems
- consideration of repairs and improvements systems
- consideration of grounds maintenance and estate services
- joint mystery shopping and resident inspection
- common resident satisfaction benchmarking
- common service standards
- using panels to bring operational staff together
- local service rationalisation in multi-landlord areas
- considering joint under occupancy strategies
- considering joint procurement
- resident complaints handling processes

Resident involvement

- shared resident training

- comparing and developing resident involvement structures
- involved resident events and newsletters

Other issues

- considering local housing and regeneration strategies
- considering national housing and other policies
- inputting into Choice Based Lettings debates
- considering digital inclusion, fuel poverty, worklessness, domestic violence and potentially other areas

Resources

Key resources for establishing and managing resident panels are:

- governance documentation for the panel
- information about how to access landlord governance structures and service reviews
- provision of key information, annual reports and Tenant Satisfaction Measures data
- financial data and information about value for money performance
- key strategic documents
- recruitment and induction procedures
- procedures for enabling a diverse and inclusive membership
- procedures for building resident confidence and awareness
- procedures for managing resident remuneration
- procedures for impact assessment and review of panel effectiveness
- procedures for managing conflict and overcoming challenges

Appendix – Glossary of Terms

Annual report to residents

Report that Registered Providers are required to produce annually for their residents.

Arm's Length Management Organisation (ALMO)

An organisation set up by a Council to manage its housing.

Cabinet

The members of the controlling political group within a Council who have legal responsibility for overall decision-making.

Choice Based Lettings

A system to enable prospective residents to choose social housing homes.

Collaborative resident panel

A resident panel made up of resident representatives from different landlords.

Co-governance

Landlord arrangements where resident panels are constitutionally part of the governance of the landlord.

Co-regulation

Residents and landlords working together to ensure and monitor standards.

Focus Group

A group of people (often a particular group such as young people) brought together to consider a particular issue on a one-off basis.

Frontline services

Housing and other services have direct contact with residents.

Governing Body

The part of an organisation that has the legal responsibility to make decisions (i.e. a Board of a housing association or ALMO and the Cabinet in a council).

Mystery Shopping

A method of checking services where unknown residents and/or others assess particular services.

Registered Provider

A landlord registered as a social housing provider with the Regulator of Social Housing.

Regulatory Standard

A standard set by the Regulator of Social Housing with which Registered Providers are required to comply.

Resident Scrutiny

Residents involved in close and critical observation or examination of landlord services and operation.

Right to Manage

A legal right for council residents where they can take over management of their homes.

Scrutiny

Close and critical observation or examination.

Service Review Group

A body set up in landlords to review a particular service usually involving residents.

Sounding Board

A body set up in landlords which is consulted on particular issues (usually by post or e-mail).

Task and Finish Group

A temporary group set up to review a particular service or activity.

Tenant Federation

A (usually independent) tenant representative body in a particular area

Tenant Involvement and Empowerment Standard

The Regulatory Standard that applies to how landlords involve and empower their residents in decision-making

Tenant Satisfaction Measures

A range of performance indicators set out by the Regulator of Social Housing in the Tenant Satisfaction Measures Standard.

Tenant Management Organisation

A resident owned organisation that has legal responsibility to manage local authority or housing association homes and estates.

Under Occupancy

An issue where a home has more bedrooms than the occupants are considered to need.

Value for Money

Ensuring that resources are used effectively and efficiently.