Tenant Engagement:

Insights from best practice in Europe.

Developing an evidence-based framework for tenancy engagement in Ireland

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Foreword

The Irish Tenant Engagement Network (ITEN) are very pleased to commission this research report on Tenant Engagement with insights from best practice in Europe. The report presents a timely and valuable contribution to the ongoing evolution of tenant engagement practice in Ireland. It highlights a series of clear lessons and practical recommendations that, if embraced, can support Approved Housing Bodies (AHBs) build deeper, more authentic relationships with tenants. These lessons range from the importance of embedding engagement into organisational culture and leadership structures, to the need for striking the right balance between proactive outreach and respecting tenant autonomy. At the heart of the findings is a call for a principles-based approach that values the quality of engagement over quantity, prioritises trust and respect, and ensures that engagement is continuous and embedded, and not merely transactional.

The report underscores that tenant engagement is not a box-ticking exercise, but a way of working that can and should permeate every level of our organisations. Tenant engagement should not be peripheral or an optional activity, it is central to the mission of housing providers who seek to foster thriving, inclusive communities. In Ireland's Approved Housing Body (AHB) sector, there is a growing recognition that meaningful engagement with tenants is key to achieving better housing outcomes, stronger communities, and more responsive governance.

The research also reminds us that engagement must be inclusive, adaptable, and reflective of tenants' voices. Whether through peer-led initiatives, digital and in-person channels, or integrated feedback mechanisms, we encourage AHBs across the sector to explore creative approaches that meet tenants where they're at and support them to play meaningful roles in shaping the services and communities that affect their lives. Ultimately, the value of tenant engagement lies not only in how tenants are involved, but in how their contributions shape decisions, improve services, strengthen future planning and foster mutual accountability. As the sector faces new challenges and opportunities, the insights in this report provide a thoughtful, evidence-informed foundation for AHBs looking to strengthen their approach.

It is our hope that these lessons serve as both a guide and an inspiration for organisations seeking to place tenants at the heart of what they do. Realising the potential of tenant engagement will require commitment, creativity, and courage—but the rewards, for both tenants and providers, are considerable.

Irish Tenant Engagement Network (ITEN) Chair,

Darren Hudson

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1. Introduction

The Irish Tenant Engagement Network (ITEN) is a network of Approved Housing Bodies (AHBs) that have come together to promote best practice in tenant engagement in Ireland.

In 2024, ITEN commissioned Just Economics to conduct research to support the creation of an evidence-based framework for tenant engagement in Ireland.

The project had three aims:

- To identify best practice in tenant engagement across Europe.

- To identify what tenant engagement data other social housing providers collect and how these data are used.

- To make recommendations for Irish AHBs in light of these findings.

This report is the final output of the commission. The methodology used is set out in Box 1. Section 2 presents the findings, and a series of case studies are available in Appendix 1.

Box 1: Methodology

The methodology consisted of a review of the literature on tenant engagement and qualitative research with tenant engagement professionals.

The review is structured around the following research questions:

1. How is tenant engagement defined?

2. What are the different forms of tenant engagement?

3. What factors promote tenant engagement?

4. What motivates tenants to participate and what are the barriers?

5. What motivates housing providers to participate and what are the barriers?

6. What are the benefits of tenant engagement?

7. What is considered best practice in tenant engagement?

8. What are the lessons for ITEN/Ireland?

9. What are areas for future research?

This analytic review was conducted through academic databases and Google Scholar. Searches used combinations of the terms: "participation", "engagement", "involvement" "social housing", "co-production", "co-design", and "tenant" to find relevant literature. Grey literature such as annual reports of housing providers were also consulted.

The focus was mainly on countries where tenant engagement is most well-established: the UK and Northern Europe. In addition, three existing literature reviews were drawn upon (Preece et al, 2019[1] ; Stone et al. 2024[2] and Mullins et al. 2017[3]).

Tenant engagement is well developed internationally in theory and practice [4] and benefits from a reasonably strong evidence base. However, much of what is available is based on qualitative or case study evidence and self-evaluation. There is a lack of empirical data, particularly with regard to demonstrating causal connections between tenant engagement and wider tenancy-related outcomes.[5]

The emphasis in this review is on empirical evidence where possible, although many data gaps remain.

Interviews took place with 6 organisations, and a written response was provided by another organisation. Published academic and grey literature, including strategic plans for tenant engagement were also consulted. Interviews covered the following topics.

	1. Organisation's approach to tenant engagement, successful strategies and areas for improvement
	2. Approach to tenant engagement data collection and how data is used
	3. Recommendations regarding tenant engagement and data collection

1   Preece, J. (2019). Understanding approaches to tenant participation in social housing. An evidence review, provision. Welsh Government Social Research, Merthyr Tydfil. Preece J.
2   Stone, W., Veeroja, P., Goodall, Z., Horton, E., & Duff, C. (2024). Social housing pathways by policy co-design: opportunities for tenant participation in system innovation in Australia. AHURI Final Report, (418).
3   Mullins, D., & Shanks, P. (2017). Tenant involvement in governance: Models and practices final report. University of Birmingham's Housing and Communities Research Group.
4   Housing agencyhttps://www.housingagency.ie/sites/default/files/2022-09/2022%20Housing%20Agency%20Policy%20Insights_Issue%202.pdf
5   Lambourne, T., & Jenkins, S. (2020). Enhancing social values, identity and wellbeing: the impact of participatory working with housing association tenants. Community Development Journal, 55(2), 331-348.

2. Findings on tenant engagement across Europe

This section summarises the main findings, following the research questions set out in Box 1. It then discusses different approaches to data collection used by housing providers and the ways in which data are used. It begins with a brief discussion of the varying contexts for social housing.
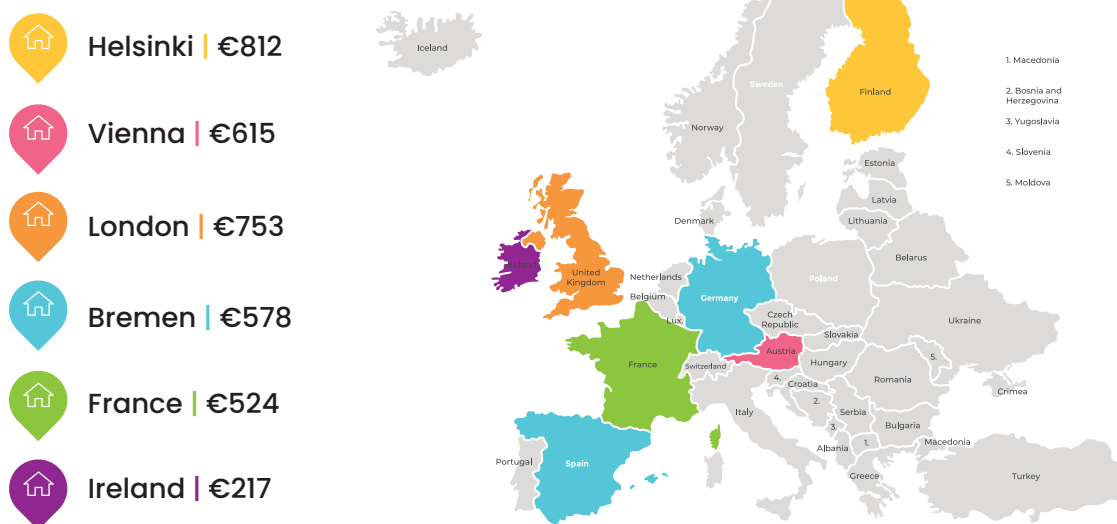
2.1 The context for tenant engagement

The context for social housing varies across Europe, reflecting different political traditions, housing systems and governance structures, and tenant engagement has evolved differently to reflect this. There are several important points of difference to note.

First, despite problems with supply and affordability issues across the housing sector, Ireland has one of the most affordable social housing systems in Europe. Tenants typically pay between 10 and 15% of their income on rent, which is below the average of around 25-30%. It is also significantly below the threshold of what is considered affordable (30%).[6] Rents in countries like Denmark and Austria are calculated on a cost-rental, rather than income basis, and these models are distinct from the Irish model as a result. In Ireland, eligibility for social housing is distinct from other affordable housing programmes, which are only available to households whose income is above the social housing income threshold.

Whilst most countries provide housing subsidies for low-income households to offset rent, nonetheless, the base rate tends to be higher, and many households will be paying these higher rents. In Ireland, the emphasis on low rents and security may come at the expense of funds to support activities like engagement. Nonetheless, and despite a range of criticisms of the differential rents system,[7][8] lower rents provide significant equity benefits for this segment of the housing population. Table 1 provides a summary of typical rents for comparison.

Average rent based on a 77mtr sq dwelling

Helsinki | €812

Vienna | €615

London | €753

Bremen | €578

France | €524

Ireland | €217

Source: NESC (2014)[9]

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6   https://unece.org/media/press/395067
7   NESC (2014) Social Housing at a Crossroads https://www.nesc.ie/news-events/press-releases/nesc-publishes-report-138-social-housing-crossroads
8   Doolan, M., Roantree, B., & Slaymaker, R. (2022). Low income renters and housing supports (No. 141). Research Series.
9   http://files.nesc.ie/nesc_background_papers/NESC_112_bg_6.pdf

The nature of the sector also differs greatly with cooperative models being much more common in Northern Europe. In Austria and Germany, for example, tenants often buy an equity stake when they move in, leading to a more consensus-driven model where engagement is built into the system. For example, housing associations would tend to source their trustees from within the tenant population. There are also much stronger traditions of tenant organisation and activism.

However, social housing in Ireland is much more residualised, meaning that there is a higher concentration of low-income households within the population. It is more likely, therefore, in a country like Austria that the requisite skills (legal, accounting, management experience) can be sourced within the tenant population.

The UK has a similar housing mix to Ireland. However, the sector there is also more commercialised meaning rents, and the risk of eviction, are higher. Housing Associations tend to pursue softer tenant participation strategies (i.e. structured engagement activities).[10] Aligned with this, the UK has also pioneered the measurement of tenant satisfaction. Also in the UK, the Tenant Participation Advisory Service (TPAS) has been set up to support training and engagement.

Legal requirements for consultation tend to be stronger across Europe than in Ireland. In Finland, for example, there is a legal regulation that the sector consults with tenants and that tenants have oversight of budgets. In the Netherlands, tenants' organisations have legal rights to be consulted on key decisions.

A final contextual difference is that European organisations collect and store personal information about their tenants, which enables a greater understanding of who lives in social housing and what their needs are.

2.2 Defining tenant engagement

What tenant engagement means and how it is practised varies widely across countries and within housing bodies.[11] Moreover, the terms 'engagement', 'involvement' and 'participation' are used interchangeably.

Pawson et al.[12] define tenant engagement as "the broad processes through which tenants might influence their social landlord's activity". Preece (2019)[13] reviews several definitions and arrives at: "Tenants' involvement with decision making, policy changes, performance improvement, and community projects." The Scottish Government has defined it as:

"Tenants taking part in decision making processes and influencing decisions about housing policies, housing conditions and housing (and related) services. It is a two-way process which involves the sharing of information, ideas and power."[14]

A recent study, funded by The Housing Agency's Research Support Programme, defines tenant engagement as:

"…the effective involvement of tenants, both directly and via representative associations, in housing management decision making, policy formation and changes, performance improvement, and community projects at local and national levels."[15]

What these definitions share is an emphasis on engagement being more than a tokenistic exercise, with a focus on partnership, two-way engagement and the challenging of power dynamics.[16] It is interesting to compare these definitions against the practice, as will be discussed later on.

[10] Lambourne, T., & Jenkins, S. (2020). Enhancing social values, identity and wellbeing: the impact of participatory working with housing association tenants. Community Development Journal, 55(2), 331-348.

[11] Hickman, P., & Preece, J. (2019). Understanding social housing landlords' approaches to tenant participation. UK Collaborative Center for Housing Evidence Glasgow.

[12] Pawson, H., Bright, J., Engberg, L., van Bortel, G., McCormack, L., & Sosenko, F. (2012). Resident involvement in social housing in the UK and Europe.

[13] Preece, J. (2019). Understanding approaches to tenant participation in social housing. An evidence review, provision. Welsh Government Social Research, Merthyr Tydfil. Preece J.

[14] Scottish Government (2019) Guide to Successful Tenant Participation https://www.gov.scot/publications/guide-successful-tenant-participation/

[15] Jordan, M. (2022). Empowering Tenants: Protecting Human Rights: Effective Tenant Participation in the Management of Local Authority Housing.

[16] Jordan, M. (2022). Empowering Tenants: Protecting Human Rights: Effective Tenant Participation in the Management of Local Authority Housing.

2.3 Key debates on tenant engagement

One theme of the literature is the tension between an individualised/consumer model, and one based around citizenship and empowerment.[17] These reflect more widely the divide between US and European approaches to participation. For example, in the US, individuals using services are often referred to as 'customers' or 'consumers' rather than 'service users'.[18]

The main issue with the consumer model is that social housing is not a functioning market, and consumer power is limited due to lack of choice or competition[19] (i.e. social housing is scarce and tenants cannot just vote with their feet).

The citizenship and empowerment model is closely associated with ideas of co-production. Co-production refers to the involvement of service users in the planning, implementation, and evaluation of a product or service. It emphasises a partnership between providers (like AHBs) and recipients, valuing the input and resources that all participants bring to the table. Under this model, service users lived experience privileges them with a unique form of knowledge as 'experts-by-experience'. It is closely related to a range of other terms that generally refer to some form of meaningful engagement (see Table 2).

	Approach	Definition
	Co-design	It signifies the active involvement of a diverse range of participants in exploring, developing, and testing responses to shared challenges (Blomkamp 2018).
	Community engagement	Proactively seeking community values, concerns, and aspirations, to incorporate them into decision making (Moore et al. 2016).
	Co-production	A partnership approach to the delivery of public services, sometimes encompassing the whole policy process (from design to implementation) (Bracci et al. 2016:7).
	Participatory democracy	A form of democratic government in which citizens have ample opportunity to make decisions about public policy (Bevir 2009:130).
	Deliberative democracy	A form of democratic government based on the unconstrained exchange of arguments and reasoned discussion (Cooke 2000:947–948).
	Human-centred design	A contextualised design-led methodology that incorporates end users' needs and aspirations, and that involves citizens and other stakeholders in the design process in different ways (van der Bijl-Brouwer 2016).

Table 2: Definitions of forms of engagement[20]

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[17] Bradley, Q. (2012). Proud to be a tenant: The construction of common cause among residents in social housing. Housing Studies, 27(8), 1124-1141.

[18] McLaughlin, H. (2009). What's in a name:'client','patient','customer','consumer','expert by experience','service user'—what's next?. British Journal of Social Work, 39(6), 1101-1117.

[19] Bradley, Q. (2014). The Tenants' Movement: Resident involvement, community action and the contentious politics of housing. Routledge.

[19] Stone, W., Veeroja, P., Goodall, Z., Horton, E., & Duff, C. (2024). Social housing pathways by policy co-design: opportunities for tenant participation in system innovation in Australia. AHURI Final Report, (418).

Although coproduction is widely endorsed as best practice in tenant engagement and service delivery generally,[21] a consistent finding from the wider service design literature is that both user engagement and co-production are challenging to implement effectively.[22] Findings from such processes are generally under-utilised and difficult to translate into service improvements.[23] This points to the importance of engaging tenants with a clear purpose and ensuring that there is a process in place for responding to feedback.

In addition, there are concerns about a trend towards 'responsibilisation' of tenants, for example by them taking on responsibilities (e.g. as a board member), and the nature of power in this relationship. For example, these participatory governance arrangements can impact on tenant identity, which can be torn between fiduciary duty to the housing provider and the requirement to represent tenants. A further distinction is between 'landlord-controlled' and 'tenant-controlled', or top-down versus bottom-up approaches.[24] For example, it can be possible to have a very meaningful engagement process in place but for it to be a singular approach that is entirely selected and controlled by the provider.

It is generally possible to place the various activities along a spectrum of engagement, and several have been set out in the literature (e.g. Arstein's ladder of citizen engagement).[25] Positioning on this spectrum relates to some extent to whether a consumerist or co-production approach is taken with the former being on the more transactional end of the process. The Housing Agency describes a spectrum from customer care initiatives, through tenant associations to shared or devolved management.[26] Figure 1 shows one example,[27] which also works in a social housing context. On the left-hand side we have the consumerist relationship and as we move rightwards, tenants are engaged more on operational issues, further to the right, tenants are involved in strategy and codesign.

Giving Information

Consulting and Advising

Complaining

Listening and Responding

Experience Based Co-Design

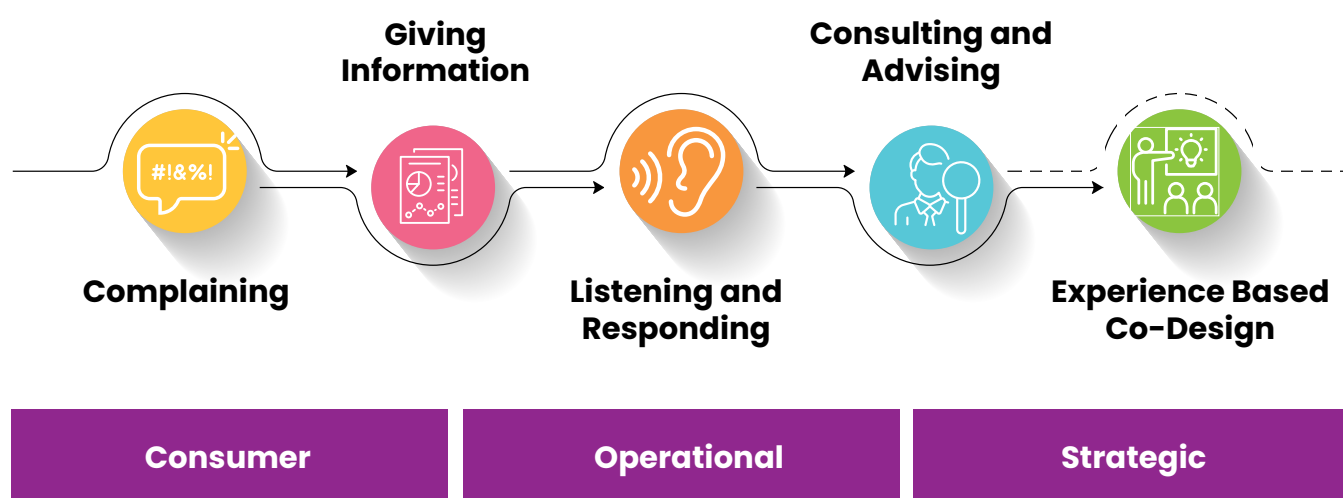| Consumer	Operational	Strategic

Figure 1: Levels of tenant engagement

Whilst a hierarchy of involvement is often implied (with strategic engagement as the highest form), it is important to note that effective engagement requires structures across all these levels. For example, it is possible to have good and bad quality complaints procedures. These more consumerist approaches are best described as a 'necessary but not sufficient' part of the process.

21 Needham, C. (2008). Realising the potential of co-production: Negotiating improvements in public services. Social policy and society, 7(2), 221-231.

22 Voorberg, W. H., Bekkers, V. J., & Tummers, L. G. (2015). A systematic review of co-creation and co-production: Embarking on the social innovation journey. Public management review, 17(9), 1333-1357.

23 Coulter, A. (2017). Patient and public involvement in healthcare. EBOOK: Healthcare Management, 328.

24 McKee, K., & Cooper, V. (2008). The paradox of tenant empowerment: Regulatory and liberatory possibilities. Housing, theory and society, 25(2), 132-146.

25 Arnstein, S. R. (2019). A ladder of citizen participation. Journal of the American planning association, 85(1), 24-34.

26 The Housing Agency (2001) Managing in Partnership: Enabling Tenant Participation in Housing Estate Management, The Dept for Environment and Local Government.

27 Bate P, Robert G. Experience-based design: from redesigning the system around the patient to co-designing services with the patient. Qual Saf Health Care 2006 Oct;15(5):307-310

2.4 History of tenant engagement

Formal tenant engagement emerged in the 1970s in England and Scotland as part of the wider rights and participatory democracy movements,[28] but there is a much longer history of informal engagement dating back to the rapid urbanisation in the late 19th century.

It is important to locate its development within the context of the growth of participatory policy methods which are now widely recognised as beneficial for effective policy design.[29] This is thought to be particularly important for complex systems where incorporating the lived experience of multiple stakeholders can improve outcomes.[30,31] For example, some argue that failures in the design, implementation and management of social housing estates in the past may have been possible to mitigate or avoid if meaningful engagement had taken place.[32]

However, engagement has evolved differently in different parts of the world and the extent to which tenants are involved in different types of activities varies markedly. Pawson has observed that individualisation (i.e. the US model) is increasingly apparent across Europe.[33]

In England, the Grenfell Tower tragedy increased the awareness of power imbalances in social housing and was influential in promoting renewed interest in tenant engagement. Nonetheless, evidence suggests (including from our interviews) that the combination of austerity measures and rent reductions has resulted in fewer resources for tenant participation.[34]

Although Ireland also has a long history of tenant action, the overriding concern of housing policy throughout the 20th century has been housing delivery rather than management. This was exacerbated by the introduction of house purchase schemes, where little concern was given to housing beyond allocation and rent collection until the home was eventually purchased.[35] Formal tenant engagement did not take place until the 1990s when structures were put in place, mainly around regeneration projects in Dublin and Limerick.[36] Although patchy and inconsistent, these measures did point to a growing recognition of the importance of involving tenants in the design and implementation of new developments.[37]

In the 2010s legal obligations were placed on local authorities to promote effective participation. This means that when important decisions are made, they must provide individuals and communities affected with opportunities for meaningful participation and must carry out their housing functions in a way that protects the human rights of individuals and communities in their area. Yet there remains an absence of a structured tenant participation model (e.g. in Housing for All) and there is no expectation that tenants would become involved in scrutiny, inspections or decision-making processes.[38]

Also in the 2010s, AHBs had begun to develop a more strategic approach by hiring dedicated tenant engagement staff and implementing policies. This was formalised in 2022 when the AHBRA published its standards for AHBs, which require AHBs to actively seek input from tenants and provide regular opportunities for engagement on service provision.[39] The Irish Tenant Engagement Network was established in 2022 to promote best practice in tenant engagement. In 2022, Tuath Housing Association launched research called Embedding a Culture of Tenant Engagement: Recommendations for Social Housing in the Irish Context.

Finally, Covid-19 accelerated digitalization of tenant engagement, and many housing providers are increasingly moving engagement online, although digital exclusion remains a challengew[40] and there is evidence to suggest that face-to-face engagement continues to be valued. See Appendix 1 for some examples of online engagement.

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28   Simmons, R., & Birchall, J. (2007). Tenant participation and social housing in the UK: applying a theoretical model. Housing Studies, 22(4), 573-595.
29   Stone, W., Veeroja, P., Goodall, Z., Horton, E., & Duff, C. (2024). Social housing pathways by policy co-design: opportunities for tenant participation in system innovation in Australia. AHURI Final Report, (418).
30   Blomkamp, E. (2022). Systemic design practice for participatory policymaking. Policy Design and Practice, 5(1), 12-31.
31   Norman, A. (2020). Policy innovation-what, why and how.
32   Housing Agency (2022) Empowering Tenants: Protecting Human Rights https://www.housingagency.ie/sites/default/files/RSPs/CAN%20CHLRP%20University%20of%20Southampton%202022%20Empowering%20tenants%20protecting%20human%20rights.pdf
33   Pawson, H., & Sosenko, F. (2012). Tenant satisfaction assessment in social housing in England: How reliable? How meaningful?. International Journal of Consumer Studies, 36(1), 70-79.
34   Hickman, P., & Preece, J. (2019). Understanding social housing landlords' approaches to tenant participation. UK Collaborative Center for Housing Evidence Glasgow.
35   Norris, M and Redmond, D; (2005) 'Reforming Local Authority Housing Management: the case of tenant participation in estate management" In: Norris, M. and Redmond, D (eds). Housing Contemporary Ireland: policy, society and shelter. Dublin: Institute of Public Administration. , pp.183-204
36   Norris, M. (2007). Social housing. Housing Contemporary Ireland, 160.
37   Norris, M and Redmond, D; (2005) 'Reforming Local Authority Housing Management: the case of tenant participation in estate management" In: Norris, M. and Redmond, D (eds). Housing Contemporary Ireland: policy, society and shelter. Dublin: Institute of Public Administration. , pp.183-204
38   Jordan, M. (2022). Empowering Tenants: Protecting Human Rights: Effective Tenant Participation in the Management of Local Authority Housing.
39   AHBRA (2022] The Regulatory Framework for Approved Housing Bodies in Ireland https://www.ahbregulator.ie/app/uploads/2022/10/The-Regulatory-Framework-for-Approved-Housing-Bodies-in-Ireland.pdf
40   Condie, J. M., & Ayres, L. (2022). Tenant Participation and Engagement in a Digitalising Society: Social Media Use in the Social Housing Sector.

2.5 Types of tenant engagement

Tenant engagement can take many forms, and the type of engagement employed may depend on factors such as the goals of the engagement, the housing context, and tenant needs/capacities. Table 3 gives a list of the various forms that can be used and the goals that they might relate to.

Table 3: Forms of tenant engagement

Form of engagement	Examples	Goals
Information and advice	☐ Newsletters, ☐ Email/social media updates ☐ Public notices ☐ Community meetings	To keep tenants informed and aware of changes that affect them.
Complaints/feedback	☐ Help desks ☐ Tenant complaint systems ☐ Feedback surveys ☐ Mystery shoppers	Resolving tenant concerns and responding to issues as they arise, often through grievance mechanisms or feedback systems.
Consultations	☐ Surveys ☐ Focus groups ☐ Public consultations ☐ Estate walk-abouts	Tenants are consulted about specific issues or changes, and their feedback is sought to inform decisions. However, decision-making remains with the housing provider.
Collaboration	☐ Tenant panels ☐ Resident associations ☐ Participatory workshops	To build partnerships and share responsibility for decisions that affect the housing community.
Coproduction	☐ Tenant Management Organisations (TMOs) ☐ Governance arrangements ☐ Interview panels	Tenants have significant control or shared authority over decisions, policies, or the management of housing estates.
Social/community engagement	☐ Community events ☐ Workshops ☐ Training	Involves tenants in activities that go beyond housing issues, promoting social cohesion.
Digital engagement	☐ Online portals, Apps ☐ Social media groups ☐ Virtual meetings	To make engagement more accessible, cost effective and convenient.
Tenant-led	☐ Tenant unions	Tenants take the initiative to organize and advocate for their interests, often through independent associations or lobbying efforts.

2.6 Examples from across Europe

In 2.2, we set out the different levels of engagement. In this section, we describe some examples that correspond to those different levels. This is by no means an exhaustive discussion, rather it provides a brief overview of some of the main approaches. More information on strategies provided in Appendix 1.

Levels of engagement

Tenant engagement structures tend to operate at different levels; from estate to regional and national. As a result of greater decentralisation in some countries, it is common for some providers to only operate regionally. Some engagement is entirely internal to that provider (e.g. in the UK) and others are cross-organisational (e.g. Sweden).

One of the most common structures at estate level is through mechanisms like Tenant Management Organisations (TMOs)[41], which are widespread in England. These are tenant majority organisations that manage housing services under a formal agreement with the landlord or local housing authority.

At the national or regional level, various governance arrangements are observed. England, the Netherlands, and Belgium tend to have a minority of tenant board members, and this extends to a legal requirement in the Netherlands. However, also in the Netherlands, tenants tend not to be elected to the board of their own organisation to avoid conflicts of interest. However, evidence suggests that landlords typically attach more significance to tenant councils, panels, advisory boards or customer services committees than to main board resident membership.[42] In the UK, tenant panels and scrutiny groups also operate nationally to review landlord performance.

Self-management

As mentioned above, many countries, such as Germany, have a long tradition of housing cooperatives, where tenants collectively own and manage housing. There are also several successful examples in the UK of large stock transfers to co-operative models of housing.[43]

In Denmark, tenant-controlled housing is the norm, and it has been a pioneer of tenant democracy.[44] This enables tenants of housing associations to exert significant influence over estate management. Every year at an annual tenant meeting, the tenants of each housing estate elect a tenant board member responsible for estate management and financial governance. At these meetings, tenants also approve rents, the estate budget, estate management rules, and major maintenance and refurbishment projects. A majority of tenants must also approve any proposed sales of dwellings in their estates.

In Portugal, participatory budgeting initiatives allow residents, including tenants in social housing, to propose and vote on local projects.

In the Netherlands, there has been recent innovation relating to self-management, where tenants manage elements of their housing that would usually be undertaken by the housing provider, and recommend that this is integrated with formal participation.[45] There are also examples from the Netherlands, where tenants have been empowered to negotiate annual performance agreements and plans with their landlords and with the local authority, giving residents direct powers over how and where money is spent.
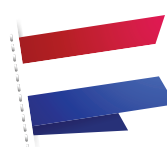

Germany, have a long tradition of housing cooperatives

Denmark, tenant-controlled housing is the norm

Portugal, residents, propose and vote on local projects

Netherlands, there has been a move to self-management

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41 Mullins, D., & Shanks, P. (2017). Tenant involvement in governance: Models and practices final report. University of Birmingham's Housing and Communities Research Group.

42 Pawson, H., Bright, J., Engberg, L., van Bortel, G., McCormack, L., & Sosenko, F. (2012). Resident involvement in social housing in the UK and Europe.

43 Mullins, D., & Shanks, P. (2017). Tenant involvement in governance: Models and practices final report. University of Birmingham's Housing and Communities Research Group.

44 Hansen, A. V., & Langergaard, L. L. (2017). Democracy and non-profit housing. The tensions of residents' involvement in the Danish non-profit sector. Housing Studies, 32(8), 1085-1104.

45 Huisman, C., & Czischke, D. (2023). Between Self-organization and Formal Participation: Increasing Tenants' Influence through Self-management?–A Dutch Case-study. Housing, Theory and Society, 40(2), 219-237.)

Function-specific engagement

In England, function-specific forums are also common, these might be things like cookery classes, or budgeting training. One health project in Nottingham established a Social Advisory Group to identify and discuss health concerns and priorities amongst social housing tenants and funding was allocated to the top priorities.[46] The provision of these kinds of services reflects greater residualisation and higher social need within the tenant population.

However, function-specific engagement can also be directly relevant to housing. In Belgium and the Netherlands, circular economy and retrofit projects have been found to work well with tenant engagement.[47] In England, one study found that tenant participation was perceived by organisations as most effective when it is linked to a specific project, such as modernisation and improvement works.[48]

Engaging with young people is a real challenge for many social landlords. A Youth Forum in Wales was established to develop youth tenants' awareness of the challenges the Housing Association faces and to gain their insights into how it should operate. An evaluation found that it led to a number of positive outcomes such as empowering tenant groups, sustaining community identity and enhancing tenant wellbeing.[49]

Self-organisation

Countries such as Sweden, the Netherlands and Belgium have national tenants' unions that play an important role in representing tenants' interests. Sweden has a long history of tenant organising. Its National Tenants Union, founded in 1923, has won gains for tenants such as rent-setting, and has helped to establish the country's public housing policies, including a role in collective bargaining. All tenants of rented housing in Sweden, including for-profit provision, have the right to be involved in negotiating rents and tenancy conditions. They also provide workshops, seminars, and information sessions on tenants' rights, sustainable living, and housing-related issues. They foster community engagement, encouraging members to participate in decision-making processes regarding housing developments.

Interviewees in the UK told us that there has been a lot of regulatory pressure for engagement but that this has also been found to incentivise a 'tickbox' approach, with interviewees criticising centralised measures which are not considered to add value.

Most organisations we spoke to provide a wide menu of options, and some are moving towards providing options in the evenings to ensure that working tenants can participate.

Regular surveys (e.g. omnibus surveys) are a core plank of many engagement strategies. Interviewees provided some good examples of where findings from these surveys improved organisational knowledge and led to concrete actions on part of Housing Associations.

Feedback Forums

Surveys

Focus Groups

[46] Phillips, O. R., Mardell, D., Stephenson, K., Hussain, S., Burton, D., Bernard, B., ... & Morling, J. R. (2024). Bringing the voice of social housing tenants into shaping the health and care research agenda. Research Involvement and Engagement, 10(1), 85.

[47] Sacranie, H., & Çetin, S. (2022). Towards a socially inclusive circular economy: A study of tenant engagement in European social housing organisations. In Social and cultural aspects of the circular economy (pp. 45-63). Routledge.

[48] REID, B., & HICKMAN, P. (2002). Are housing organisations becoming learning organisations? Some lessons from the management of tenant participation. Housing studies, 17(6), 895-918.

[49] Lambourne, T., & Jenkins, S. (2020). Enhancing social values, identity and wellbeing: the impact of participatory working with housing association tenants. Community Development Journal, 55(2), 331-348.

2.7   Barriers and motivations for tenant engagement

Although tenants generally want to be engaged and social landlords want to engage them, both stakeholders experience significant barriers to successful engagement. We discuss these in this section, beginning with barriers and motivations for tenants.

Tenant barriers/motivations

Barriers experienced by tenants tend to relate either to poor structures for participation on the part of their landlord or their own perceived, or actual, capacity to engage.

Landlord-dependent factors include:

- Institutional atmosphere[50] that discourages engagement
- Lack of engagement options
- Under-resourced structure that may incur personal costs to tenants
- Culture of power imbalances[51]

Tenant-dependent factors include:

- Perceptions of lack of influence
- Practical barriers such as transport and childcare[52]
- Conflict of interest for board membership
- Concern they do not have skills (e.g. finance/budgeting)[53]
- Lack of training and time
- Personal barriers (e.g. age, disability, language)[54]
- Consultation fatigue

Finally, poverty is a well-known barrier to participation.[55] People may be working several jobs or experiencing significant stressors, and there is a question as to whether participation is what people experiencing poverty or precarity need or want.[56]

Nonetheless, tenants are also motivated to participate. Motivations include:

- Provision of a variety of structured engagement opportunities
- Participation has been found to be greatest around 'micro-level' issues that directly affect the daily lives of tenants[57]
- Tenant voice, collective interest, empowerment
- Potential to influence change[58]
- Opportunity to challenge stigma of social housing[59]

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[50] Hickman, P., & Preece, J. (2019). Understanding social housing landlords' approaches to tenant participation. UK Collaborative Center for Housing Evidence Glasgow.

[51] (Kruythoff, H. (2008). Tenant participation in the Netherlands: the role of laws, covenants and (power) positions. Housing Studies, 23(4), 637-659.

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[56] Paddison, R., Docherty, I., & Goodlad, R. (2008). Responsible participation and housing: restoring democratic theory to the scene. Housing Studies, 23(1), 129-147.

[57] Hall, S., & Hickman, P. (2011). Resident participation in housing regeneration in France. Housing Studies, 26(6), 827-843.

[58] Suszyńska, K. (2015). Tenant participation in social housing stock management. Real Estate Management and Valuation, 23(3), 47-53.

[59] McKee, K., & Cooper, V. (2008). The paradox of tenant empowerment: Regulatory and liberatory possibilities. Housing, theory and society, 25(2), 132-146.

- Fun days and special projects appeal, especially to young people[60]
- Capacity-building programmes from which tenants also benefit[61]

In general, finding ways to ensure that tenants are getting something out of the process or are compensated for their effort, even in a small way, can help to promote engagement.

Provider barriers/motivations

A concern that is regularly raised in tenant participation research is that despite a wide menu of options, only a minority of tenants get involved, and they often are not representative of the wider tenant population.[62] In this context, the views of groups that are already well-represented will come to the fore.

This is a major barrier for providers. Tenant engagement can be resource-intensive[63] and if it does not provide a representative set of perspectives, the return on investment from efforts to engage tenants can be limited.[64]

Tenant engagement can also depend on the level of maturity of an estate and can be harder to establish in new developments,[65] although this is where providers/tenants may benefit most from engagement.

As mentioned, engagement can also be costly and where providers are under financial pressure, it can suffer. As mentioned earlier, there is evidence that austerity and cost-of-living pressures in the UK have undermined investment in tenant engagement.[66]

Nonetheless, providers are motivated to invest in tenant engagement. Some are attracted by pragmatic motivations such as efficiency/business outcomes. This is especially in England where housing associations operate on more commercial terms.[67]

Providers are also motivated by improving service delivery and achieving their social mission. Many providers are less concerned about demonstrating wider impacts because they believe it is the 'right thing to do' in and of itself.[68]

Surveys — Evening Options for working tenants — Capacity Building Programmes

Fun Days — Focus Groups — Feedback Opportunities

austerity and cost-of-living pressures in the UK have undermined investment in tenant engagement
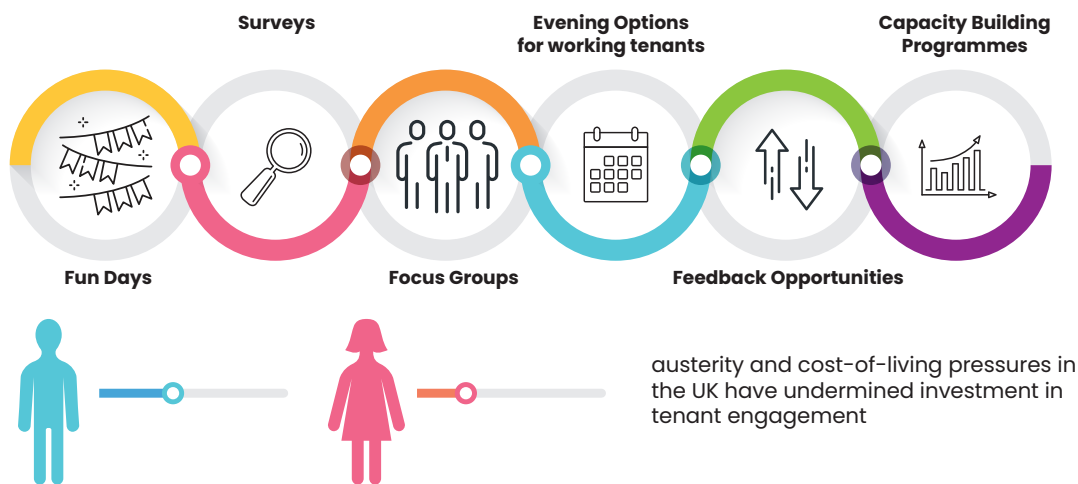
[60] Lambourne, T., & Jenkins, S. (2020). Enhancing social values, identity and wellbeing: the impact of participatory working with housing association tenants. Community Development Journal, 55(2), 331-348.

[61] Scottish Government (2019) Guide to Successful Tenant Participation https://www.gov.scot/publications/guide-successful-tenant-participation/pages/5/

[62] Preece, J. (2019). Understanding approaches to tenant participation in social housing. An evidence review, provision. Welsh Government Social Research, Merthyr Tydfil. Preece J.

[63] Stone, W., Veeroja, P., Goodall, Z., Horton, E., & Duff, C. (2024). Social housing pathways by policy co-design: opportunities for tenant participation in system innovation in Australia. AHURI Final Report, (418).

[64] Bliss, N., Lambert, B., Halfacre, C., Bell, T., & Mullins, D. (2015). An investment not a cost: The business benefits of tenant involvement. Tenants Leading Change. London: DCLG.

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[66] Hickman, P., Reeve, K., Bimpson, E., Lamb, M., Manzi, T., & Speake, B. (2023). Engaging with tenants to sustain their tenancies: insights from interviews with case study stakeholders.

[67] Simmons, R., & Birchall, J. (2007). Tenant participation and social housing in the UK: applying a theoretical model. Housing Studies, 22(4), 573-595.

[68] Mullins, D., & Shanks, P. (2017). Tenant involvement in governance: Models and practices final report. University of Birmingham's Housing and Communities Research Group.

Moreover, with the introduction of regulatory compliance in most countries, tenant engagement has become a requirement.[69] Providers are also conscious that it builds accountability to their tenants and other stakeholders including lenders who often will require evidence of it.[70] Providers place a greater emphasis on learning and continuous improvement, and tenant engagement also supports this objective. Finally, in some contexts, providers will engage with tenants where they are planning mergers to make them more attractive to the acquiring party.[71]

Interviewees highlighted that culture was crucial, with some parts of the business (e.g. housing teams) tending to be better at 'getting it'. Culture was also thought to be influenced by senior managers.

For example, if board members ask what tenants think of proposed changes, it encourages much more effort on the part of management to seek out that information.

culture was crucial, …
(e.g. housing teams) tending to be
better at 'getting it'

2.8 Evaluation of tenant engagement

A key rationale for investing in tenant engagement is that it leads to positive outcomes for providers, tenants and communities, including a financial return to providers. As noted earlier, this is a difficult area to evidence due to the challenge of causally connecting observed outcomes to engagement activities.

The existing evidence points to the following positive outcomes:

✓ Service and tenant satisfaction improvements and feelings of ownership[72]

✓ Tenants are well-placed to spot waste and duplication

✓ Tenant skill development (e.g. social capital, skills and knowledge, confidence-building, and a sense of pride in their achievements)[73]

✓ Evidence that tenant engagement leads to a better understanding of biographies and needs, which are essential to reduce tenancy breakdown and arrears[74]

✓ Engagement can boost tenant empowerment and wellbeing,[75] tackle social isolation and promote social cohesion

✓ It can potentially be a powerful communication tool (e.g. mentoring of new tenants, ambassadorial role)[76]

✓ Improved sense of community[77]

69 Preece, J. (2019). Understanding approaches to tenant participation in social housing. An evidence review, provision. Welsh Government Social Research, Merthyr Tydfil. Preece J.
70 Preece, J. (2019). Understanding approaches to tenant participation in social housing. An evidence review, provision. Welsh Government Social Research, Merthyr Tydfil. Preece J.
71   Ibid.
72 Bliss, N., Lambert, B., Halfacre, C., Bell, T., & Mullins, D. (2015). An investment not a cost: The business benefits of tenant involvement. Tenants Leading Change. London: DCLG.
73 (Bliss, N., Lambert, B., Halfacre, C., Bell, T., & Mullins, D. (2015). An investment not a cost: The business benefits of tenant involvement. Tenants Leading Change. London: DCLG.Crabtree
74 Atkinson, R. G., Habibis, D., Easthope, H., & Goss, D. N. (2007). Sustaining tenants with demanding behaviour: a review of the research evidence. Positioning Paper; Australian Housing and Urban Research Insitute (AHURI), (97), Jan-47.
75 Lambourne, T., & Jenkins, S. (2020). Enhancing social values, identity and wellbeing: the impact of participatory working with housing association tenants. Community Development Journal, 55(2), 331-348.
76 The Housing Agency (2022) Housing Insights Policy Insights Series Developing a Tenant Engagement Culture and Structure: The Case of Circle VHA
77 Woodard, R., & Rossouw, A. (2021). An evaluation of interventions for improving pro-environmental waste behaviour in social housing. Sustainability, 13(13), 7272.

Two reports from the UK have sought to identify value for money improvements from tenant engagement. The first estimated that it led to a saving of £29 per property annually, or £118 million a year if generalised to all tenancies.[78] In addition, Amicus Horizon, reported annual resource savings of at least £2.7 million per year attributed to effective tenant engagement strategies.[79]

Tenant Engagement = Value for money

SAVING
£29 PER PROPERTY ANNUALLY

£118 MILLION SAVING IF GENERALISED TO ALL TENANCIES

Research also finds that maintaining a strong presence on estates (estate walkabouts; community drop-in sessions; and multi-agency community events) is important.[80] In this context, it is important to follow the **'making every conversation count'** approach where engagement is built into the ongoing work of housing officers. On the other hand, younger tenants have been found to be likely to use online mediums/ social media/ text messages and less likely to communicate by telephone than their older counterparts.[81]

Interviewees strongly agreed that engagement was important to the work of the Housing Associations. In the UK, where engagement is required by the regulator, organisations tend to go much further than the minimum because they believe it is a valuable exercise.

However, they sometimes struggle to demonstrate the benefits of engagement. Engagement teams are not always the best at tracking outcomes from engagement and all organisations felt they could do more to reach a broader demographic and ensure that engagement was meaningful.

One interviewee described how during the pandemic, they tracked needs over time and discovered that tenants were struggling to get to the shops. As a result, they arranged food parcel deliveries for them.

In another example, survey data collected as part of tenant engagement has also helped to make up for weaknesses in the CRM (e.g. relating to the demographics of tenants). For example, Clarion collects key personal information on tenants when they take up a tenancy. However, there is a lot of missing data (up to 35%). They update this as people ring in, but this is a slow process. Their surveys are used to supplement this data. They get a large sample (circa 2,000), which enables them to segment customers and gain insights for different tenant categories (e.g. age, gender, household composition). They also conduct booster samples (e.g. amongst young people) if they have under-reporting. They have flags on the CRM for people who don't want to take part in data collection, so they don't approach them.

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[78] DCLG (2015) Tenants Leading Change: An investment not a cost: The business benefits of tenant involvement
[79] Bailey, Nick, Manzi, T. and Simpson, I. 2015. Success, satisfaction and scrutiny: the business benefits of involving residents. London University of Westminster
[80] Hickman, P., Reeve, K., Bimpson, E., Lamb, M., Manzi, T., & Speake, B. (2023). Engaging with tenants to sustain their tenancies: insights from interviews with case study stakeholders.
[81] Ibid.

2.9   Barriers to involving hard to reach tenants

As discussed, for engagement to reach its potential, it needs to be representative of all voices. Moreover, tenants that are less likely to participate are potentially those tenants that providers would like to involve. Even when programmes are successfully implemented, there is a need to consider the factors that motivate tenant participation and reasons why some tenants may not participate.[82] More research is needed to identify strategies for promoting engagement and social connections with groups that do not participate, such as older tenants[83] and young people.[84] Engagement through technology may be a way to reach some excluded groups whilst minimising costs, but there are also risks of digital exclusion.

In Scotland, the Hebridean Housing Partnership works across the Western Isles. They have a very scattered community of tenants and use innovative methods such as:

- 'Village voices' where tenants gather the views of friends and families.
- Funding travel and subsistence for tenants who have to travel to attend engagement events.
- Holding meetings informally in cafes and tenants' homes.[85]

The Scottish Government has developed a Guide to Successful Tenant Participation that contains best practice in involving other groups, including Travellers.

Interviewees told us that engagement tends to work best where it is incentivised, has a budget and where training or support are provided. Whist there are lots of engagement activities, interviewees generally thought that there was room for improvement in terms of meaningfulness/effectiveness and demonstrating the outcomes from tenant engagement.

Engagement works best with a budget

Training and Support make a difference

Engagement activities are effective

82   Simmons, R., & Birchall, J. (2007). Tenant participation and social housing in the UK: applying a theoretical model. Housing Studies, 22(4), 573-595.

83   Sheppard, C. L., Kwon, C., Yau, M., Rios, J., Austen, A., & Hitzig, S. L. (2023). Aging in place in social housing: a scoping review of social housing for older adults. Canadian Journal on Aging/La Revue canadienne du vieillissement, 42(1), 69-79.

84   Lambourne, T., & Jenkins, S. (2020). Enhancing social values, identity and wellbeing: the impact of participatory working with housing association tenants. Community Development Journal, 55(2), 331-348.

85   Scottish Government (2019) Guide to Successful Tenant Participation
https://www.gov.scot/publications/guide-successful-tenant-participation/pages/5/

Figure 2 summarises some of the barriers and suggests mitigations.

Barriers	Mitigations
Methodological barriers – how participation is organised: lack of information provision, lack of definition of the scope of the involvement	**Mitigations** • Good planning • Clarity of purpose • Proactive engagement
Physical barriers – access issues: location of meetings for dispersed groups	**Mitigations** • Dedicated resources • Provider several processes • Be flexible
Attitudinal barriers – the way organisers respond to service users' needs regarded as the most serious obstacle, centred around power imbalances and lack of trust	**Mitigations** • Listen • Be responsive • Talk honestly about the barriers
Financial and resource problems – providing practical support, lack of provision of practical help such as travel costs and lunch, financial incentives, staff shortages	**Mitigations** • Dedicated resources • Provider strong leadership support
Timing – planning events around users' ability to attend, failing to acknowledge the complex lives lived by some service users	**Mitigations** • Be flexible • Provide online options • Demonstrate the value of the process (e.g. quick wins)
Consultation/ participation fatigue – respect everyone's time and energy	**Mitigations** • Good planning • Use creative techniques • Make every conversation count (MECC)

2.10   Data collection

European housing associations collect and store personal information about their tenants and Ireland is something of an outlier in not doing so. They hold these data for purposes of housing management, compliance, service delivery, and social policy and this is reported to be entirely GDPR complaint. However, the types of data collected vary depending on national regulations, housing models (municipal/non-profit/cooperative), and the digital capacity of the housing provider.

In many ways, data collection and tenant engagement are closely related, as both are ways to identify needs, which can be done both qualitatively and quantitatively. As noted, surveys are included as part of engagement as they were seen as a way to ensure that the provider is delivering what the tenants want. As one interviewee noted:

"Housing Associations are arguably lapsing in their duty of care to tenants if needs of tenants not being met. There is no justifiable reason why this information would not be collected."

The benefits of data collection were summarised as follows:

Market research on what priorities are, with lots of genuine service improvements as a result of this.

Tests new policies and procedures before they implement them.

Enables welfare of tenants to be monitored.

Informs the design of new services.

Equalities monitoring

Customer segmentation enables them to understand the experiences of different groups.

Both Austria and Denmark offer interesting models where housing data is linked to social welfare registers, such as the Social Research Register in Denmark, with strict consent rules.[86] In Austria, explicit consent is often required for deeper integration (e.g., sharing health or disability-related data).

These data linkages support integrated service delivery, eligibility assessments, and housing policy planning. Linked data include:

Individual income and employment status;

Household composition and dependents;

Welfare payments (e.g., unemployment, pensions);

Health, disability and care services (when relevant);

Educational outcomes (when relevant).

As part of this process, Danish providers discovered that proficiency in Danish language was a key determinant of successful outcomes, which led to investments in language classes. Individuals can see and control much of the data held on them via online platforms. The acceptability of this approach is partly thought to link to a culture of trust in public institutions that supports these linkages.[87]

In both the Danish and Austrian examples, the sharing of data is thought to have helped to prevent homelessness by linking rental arrears to early intervention, needs analysis, and ensuring integrated planning across housing and care.[88]

A barrier to a better knowledge base in Ireland is the fact that Local Authorities control allocations and therefore hold more data than they share with AHBs. What is generally shared is limited to the information that is required to make the allocation, but information will sometimes be held on things like learning disabilities, addiction etc. A starting point therefore would be to ask Local Authorities to share all available information with appropriate consent.

A social impact measurement framework has been developed by Just Economics for the sector and is being implemented by three AHBs: Respond, Clúid and Circle VHA.[89] The survey was based on extensive consultation with tenants and other stakeholders. As well as capturing demographics, it covers a range of outcome areas such as housing, health, wellbeing, employment/skills, and relationships. If adopted more widely in the sector, this will help to address these data gaps. This framework does not currently include questions on tenant engagement, which could either be incorporated, measured separately, or both. This issue is addressed more thoroughly in the recommendations section.

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86 Agency for Digitisation (2019) Digitisation of the Public Sector in Denmark https://www.dga.or.th/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/file_dff0e1173ce315d0a824c2236d78b943.pdf

87 OECD (2010), Denmark: Efficient e-Government for Smarter Service Delivery, OECD Publishing. http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264087118-en

88 https://socialhousing.wien/tools/eviction-prevention

89 https://circlevha.ie/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/Social-Impact-Measurement-Framework-of-AHBs-in-Ireland.pdf

3. Recommendations

The research on tenant engagement points to a number of general lessons and recommendations that apply to tenant engagement in Ireland, including:

Lesson 1: It is important that tenant engagement is underpinned by a set of principles that are widely adopted across the Irish AHB sector

Recommendation: Take a principles-based approach to tenant engagement. See Box 2 below for an initial set of principles that could be developed.

Lesson 2: The quality of engagement may matter more than the quantity of opportunities.

Recommendation: Where engagement is being measured, we would recommend a set of measures that captures quality as well as quantity. It is important not to incentivise an approach that is solely focused on capturing large numbers.

Lesson 3: A commitment to tenant engagement should run through the ethos of the organisation, rather than be a formal event that is 'done to' tenants at certain points in time.

Recommendation: This culture needs to be set by senior managers/trustees through initiatives such as building tenant satisfaction or other outcomes of engagement into performance review processes, establishing scrutiny panels that assess tenant voice in decision-making, providing training for trustees on the importance of participation, building tenant feedback formally into governance and accountability processes.

Lesson 4: It is important to strike a balance between proactive and intrusive engagement.

Recommendation: Where possible the menu of opportunities should be tenant-led, with a range of online and offline options at different times of the day.

Ultimately, it is the tenant's choice whether they participate or not. Preferences in relation to contacts should be captured in CRM systems. Incentives and training can reward tenants for participation ensuring that they are offered something in return.

Lesson 5: Tenant engagement can be built into existing ways of working without creating new structures per se. For example, by following the 'making every conversation count' ethos, where engagement is built into the ongoing work of all staff.

Recommendation: This could involve providing training on engagement to all staff and recruiting for community development experience/aptitude in housing teams. Separating out the roles of rent collection and tenant support is also advisable to ensure that staff don't have to play dual role.

Lesson 6: Tenant engagement should be aligned with other corporate objectives as much as possible.

Recommendation: As part of 'building in' engagement practice, the views of tenants should help shape these wider goals. For example, identifying ways to involve tenants meaningfully in retrofit or circular economy projects could achieve multiple goals. As AHBs move to larger-scale developments, tenant engagement will become more important to the design and management of these developments and potentially critical to their success.

Lesson 7: AHBs should ensure a process is in place for responding to feedback from tenants.

Recommendation: To ensure this is embedded and meaningful, senior managers should regularly enquire about tenant feedback when supervising staff.

Lesson 8: To avoid data protection concerns becoming a barrier, use existing in-house expertise.

Recommendation: AHBs urgently need to gather tenant engagement data about tenants to build out their knowledge base, identify needs and monitor outcomes. Data protection officers should be consulted to ascertain any barriers to data gathering and ensure compliance with applicable data protection principles.

Lesson 9: Whilst board membership is often considered a goal of tenant engagement, it may not always be suitable in the Irish sector and can lead to potential conflicts of interest.

Recommendation: Alternatives to full board membership should be available such as such as regional or function-specific engagement and/or sub-groups.

Lesson 10: Peer approaches have much potential in tenant engagement. They could contribute to improving implementation, as well as build the skills and capacities of tenants. Peer approaches may be more effective in involving hard-to-reach tenants.

Recommendation: Consider ways in which peer approaches could be developed within tenant engagement. Approaches might include:

a. Peer research (e.g. Village Voices approach),

b. Peer training and learning for tenants,

c. Peer-to-peer monitoring of tenant engagement,

Gathering evidence on the impact of these approaches will be important to help build the evidence-base.

Lesson 11: Tenant engagement requires evaluation to ensure that it is meeting tenant and AHB needs and adding value.

Recommendation: Conduct regular evaluation of tenant engagement. The nature of this evaluation can vary depending on the form of engagement and demographics of the tenants. The aim should be to gather reliable, meaningful, and actionable data. Although SMART objectives may not always be feasible, indicators should strive to align as much as possible to align with them. Although the emphasis should be on quality and depth of engagement, it is important to monitor numbers engaged, repeat engagement and demographics of engagement. Box 3 provides more details on approaches that could be considered.

Box 2: Principles of engagement

Meaningful Participatory processes must begin prior to, or before, any firm plans or decisions have been made to enable for these decisions to be genuinely informed by tenant input.

Genuine Participatory methods require investment of effort, time and funding to be effective and to produce the best outcomes. This can involve years of dedicated work, and include new work roles.

Comprehensive Formal participation structures that allow for a wide range of engagement options to facilitate inclusion. Achieving this, requires mainstreaming of tenant engagement across all roles.

Democratic Giving local residents genuine decision-making power in material matters is fundamental to achieving good outcomes.

Commitment Senior management and board demonstrate a clear commitment to embedding tenant engagement. Participation should be included in everyone's job description, not be an optional extra.

Reflective Even when engagement is going well, processes should be evaluated and inform implementation.

Inclusive Support for those with barriers to participation should be provided to ensure processes are accessible to all.

Box 3: Measurement approaches for consideration

Evaluation options to consider are as follows:

1. Simple measurement of tenant experience of engagement following engagement activities
2. Post hoc staff assessments of the quality of engagement
3. Regular tenant surveys that include questions on awareness/suitability of engagement and willingness to engage
4. Qualitative research where required for a 'deep dive' into a specific issue (e.g. to identify ways to overcome barriers for specific groups).

Tenant measurement

We would recommend a short (max 5 minute) online survey that tenants take at the end of an engagement activity. This could be structured around a series of statements that are answered on a Likert Scale (e.g. Strongly agree - strongly disagree). Some examples of statements that could be included are:

- I understand the purpose of this exercise/activity
- I found it convenient/accessible to participate
- I felt respected
- I felt my voice was heard
- I was able to express my views openly
- There was a good diversity of tenants represented
- I felt my views were taken seriously
- The feedback on decisions taken was clear
- I believe that the engagement has made a difference to the decision taken
- I would be willing to participate again
- I would recommend engagement to others

Staff assessment

The purpose of the staff assessment is to internally grade tenant engagement activities as a learning exercise and to inform future activities. We would recommend assessing the success of events against key features of successful engagement. These might include:

- Clarity of purpose and role of tenant
- Inclusivity/accessibility
- Respect and tenant voice
- Meaningfulness of process and influence of tenant on decision
- Effectiveness of feedback to tenant

Staff can then arrive at an overall score to guide their assessment of the effectiveness of the activity. This scale of impact could range between Low (tokenistic), Medium (room for improvement) and High (good quality).

Tenant survey

As well as regular surveying of tenants for management purposes, we would recommend including some questions on tenant engagement. More work is required on what exactly would be required here but a useful starting point might be the questions used by Wheatley in their tenant survey (see Table 4).

Table 4: Wheatley tenant engagement measures
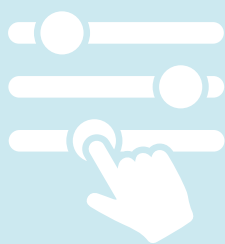
I feel in control
I have choices

- I take charge of my life I self-direct my services.
- I have access to training, life skills, employability and support.
- I see a brighter future for myself and my family.

I shape the service
I receive

- I influence the things that matter to me.
- I can give instant feedback.
- I understand performatnce from both a customer and business perspective.
- I can get involved through crowdsourcing ideas, desiging, voting on/offline discussions.

I have access to the
information I need

- Online access provides me with all the info about my home and community at my fingertips - account, costs, maintenance history investment plans, etc.

4.
Conclusions

Ireland is still in the process of developing a comprehensive and consistent tenant engagement system. What exists is somewhat fragmented compared to countries like Denmark or the Netherlands, where engagement is legally embedded and well-established. Shifts in government policy are signalling a change in that regard. However, it is important to note that the Irish sector has prioritised affordability and security, both of which are very important to an effective social housing system.
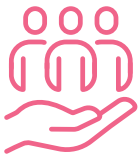
Tenant engagement is an increasingly important aspect of the design, delivery and evaluation of social housing in Ireland. As well as increasingly being a regulatory requirement there is more and more evidence for its utility for improving tenant satisfaction, operational efficiency, and tenant outcomes. Engagement methods work best when they are varied and inclusive, are led by management and built into everyday work of housing professionals.

Shifts in Government Policy are Signalling Change

The Irish Sector has prioritised Affordability and Security

Tenant Engagement is increasingly important

Engagement works best when built into the everyday

Evidence Tenant Engagement improves Tenant Satisfaction

Tenant Engagement is increasingly a Regulatory Requirement

Appendix 1: Case Studies

In this section, we set out four case studies demonstrating the range of engagement activities that organisations are undertaking.

Case study 1	Curo

Curo operates a customer community website **VoiceBox**, where 3,500 residents are engaged in an online platform.

They also conduct **community catch-ups** where a team is available on site to speak with residents.

Every month, an executive director and service director take part in a Facebook live **livestream** in which residents can ask questions.

The **Customer Oversight Group** allows customers to scrutinise business performance and suggest improvements. This group meets six times a year.

There are several **Resident Engagement Groups**, including: Complaints Review Forum, Disability Action Group, LGBTQ+ Residents' Group, Young Residents' Group, Sheltered Housing for Older People.

Curo have a **housing management system** into which they input personal information. They explain to people the need to capture data to improve service delivery and tenants generally feel that thisis reasonable. This includes 'protected characteristics' **(e.g. age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex, sexual orientation). They also ask about mental health.**

They sometimes have missing data but whenever customers call they have a system where they take them through their missing data to ensure gaps are filled. The numbers engaging in the various activities are listed in the following table.

Activity	Frequency	Customers engaged
VoiceBox	All hours, 24/7	▶ 2,555
Curo's Big Get Together	Annually	▶ 428
Community Catch-ups	Weekly	▶ 62 communities ▶ 398 customers
Board Connect	Every six months	▶ 8
Oversight Group	Quarterly	▶ 12
Scrutiny Activity Group	Start every 12 weeks	▶ 30
Complaints Review Forum	Quarterly	▶ 17
Estates Partnership Board	Quarterly	▶ 19
Homeowner Engagement Group	Quarterly	▶ 42
Tenancy Compliance Forum	Quarterly	▶ 18
Disability Action Group	Quarterly	▶ 27
BAME Group	Quarterly	▶ 4
Young Persons Group	Quarterly	▶ 6
SHOP	Every six weeks	▶ 16
BSH Workshops		▶ 15
	TOTAL	▶ 3,595

Figure 3: Curo engagement and reach

Case study 2 **Radius**

Radius provide engagement opportunities that spans the whole organisation (see Figure below). These include:

- **Informal engagement:** estate walkabouts, hero awards, community chest, community events, training and conferences, surveys, mystery shoppers and annual review.

- **Tenant representatives** who represent the area they live in (e.g. a local community group or a tenant panel).

- **A Register of Interest.** This is a list of tenants and residents who have expressed an interest in tenant engagement opportunities at all levels.

- **Tenant panels** ensure that tenants are up to date and informed through leaflets, newsletters and other publications.

- **Regular community events** such as coffee mornings, lunch clubs, and social events/clubs.

- **Service Improvement Groups** identify areas for improvement through our Panels/Groups, satisfaction surveys and complaints.

- **The Tenant Executive committee** is made up of Radius Tenant Board Member and tenants who have been elected as Chair/Vice Chair for their Area Panel.

- A **Radius Tenant Board Member** is involved indecision making at the highest level
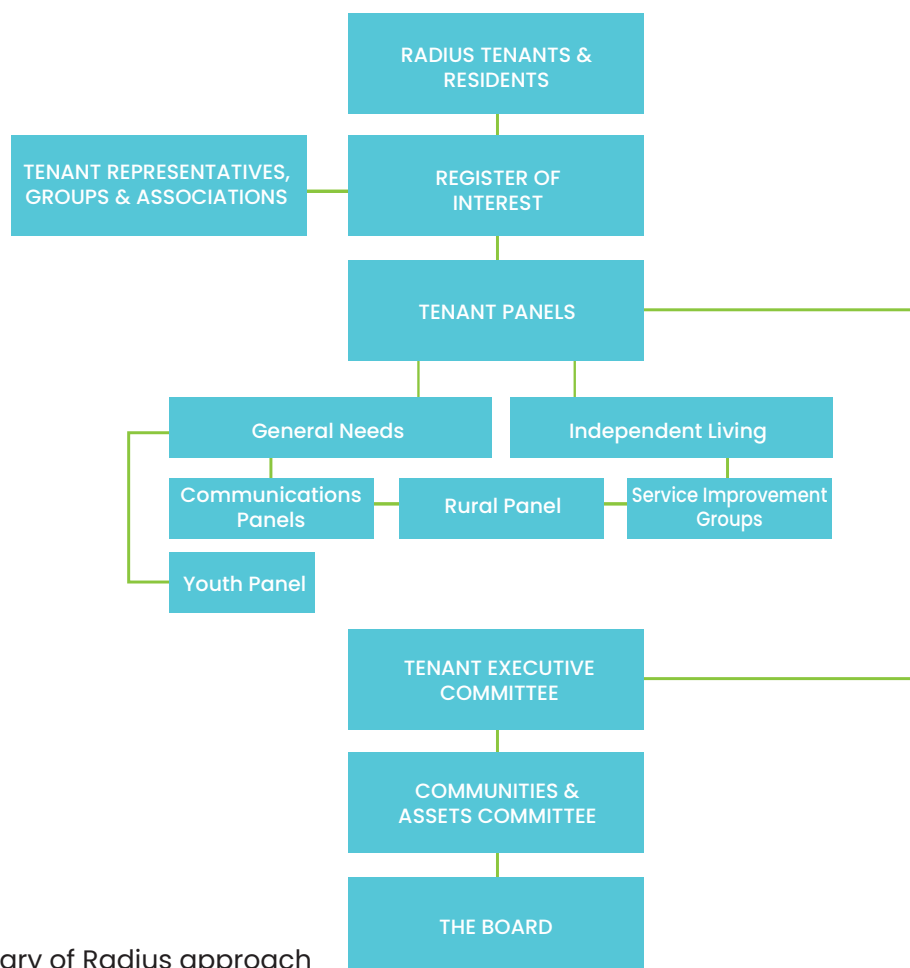

Figure 4: Summary of Radius approach

Case study 3   Clarion

Clarion has 15 resident engagement staff (5 managers and 10 officers) and each region has a budget of £25k per year. Examples of engagement activities include:

- Five Regional Scrutiny Panels (covering issues like bereavement, succession planning).

- Task and Finish groups work on an improvement area and take it from design to completion.

- Every year, staff speak with 2,000 residents for 15 minutes each and ask them 60 questions (area, jobs, wellbeing etc.).

- Annual omnibus survey, which they use to better understand their customer base (75 questions).

- Opportunities are provided at local and national level with a combination of online and face-to-face options.

Our Current resident involvement strategy features both online and face-to-face opportunities for residents to get involved with us.

online

face to face

National

- Resident Board Members
- Customer Committee
- Task & Finish Groups
- Resident Procurement Group
- Clarion voice
- Special projects & one off consultations
- Complaints project group

Local

- Tenant & resident association support
- Community inspectors
- Local and Local Offer consultations
- Partnership events
- Regional scrutiny committee

Figure 5: Clarion: methods of engagement

Case study 4   Wheatley

Wheatley's tenant engagement strategy works towards the following headline customer engagement goal:

"By 2026 our customers will be empowered to make their own choices about the services they want, be properly equipped to do things for themselves and be involved in the design of products and services from start to finish."

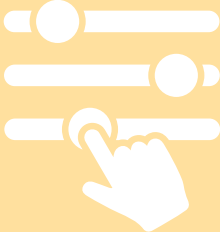This goal will be measured against the criteria set out in the following table.

I feel in control I have choices	I shape the service I receive	I have access to the information I need
• I take charge of my life I self-direct my services. • I have access to training, life skills, employability and support. • I see a brighter future for myself and my family.	• I influence the things that matter to me. • I can give instant feedback. • I understand performatnce from both a customer nd business perspective. • I can get involved through crowdsourcing ideas, desiging, voting on/offline discussions.	• Online access provides me with all the info about my home and community at my fingertips - account, costs, maintenance history investment plans, etc.

Table 5: Measures of tenant engagement

To achieve this, they have developed a pyramid of activities spanning both "breadth" and "depth" (see Figure 4).
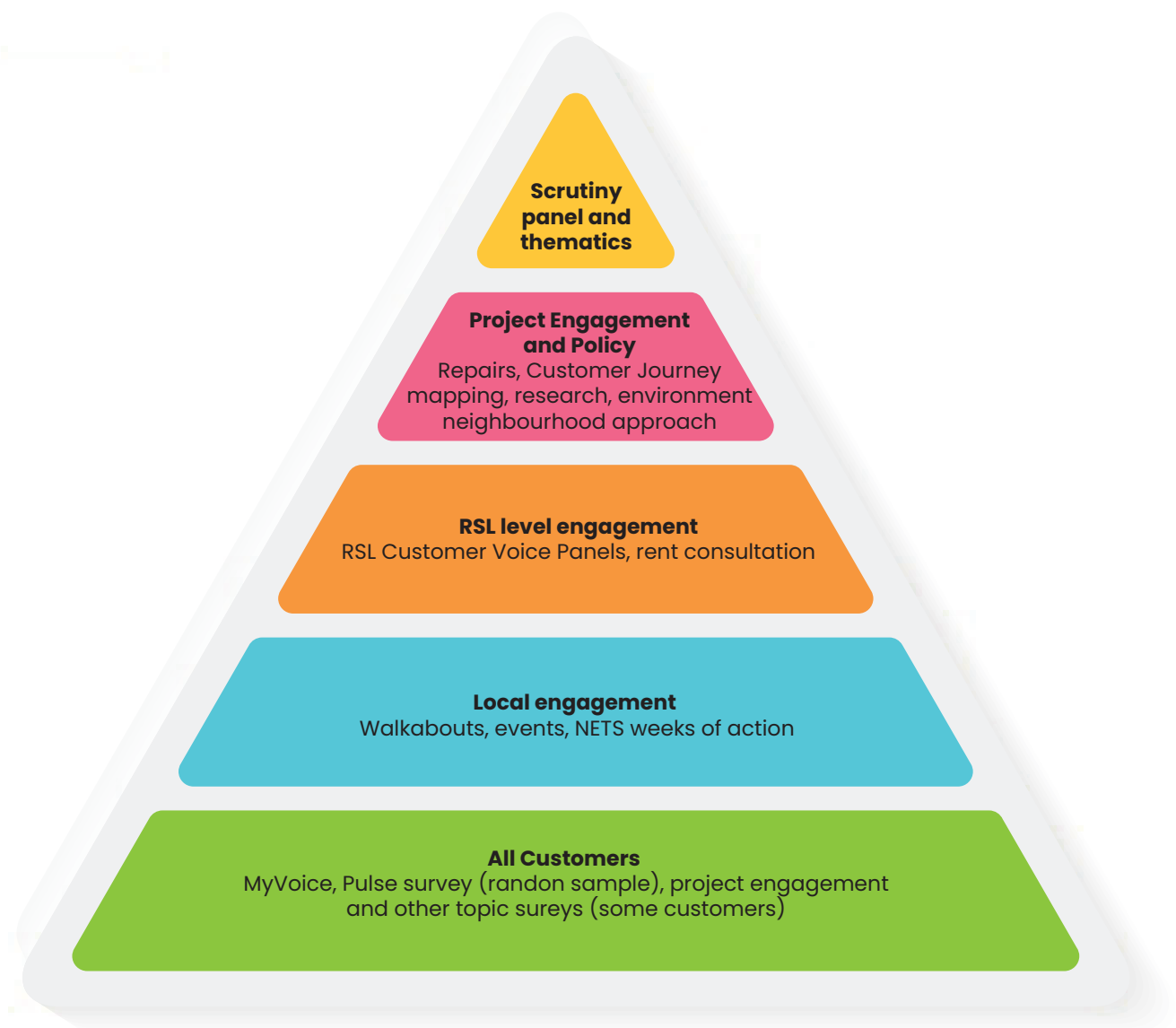
Figure 6: Summary of Wheatley Approach