

Understanding Tenant Involvement

Final report for the Tenant Services Authority

17th February 2009

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Publication of data

Any press release or publication of the findings of this survey requires the advance approval of Ipsos MORI. Such approval will only be refused on the grounds of inaccuracy or misrepresentation.

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Presentation and interpretation of the data

It is important to note that findings of this report are not *statistically representative* of the views of social housing tenants. **Qualitative research** is designed to be *illustrative, detailed and exploratory*. It is designed to provide insight into the perceptions, feelings and behaviour of people rather than conclusions from a robust, quantifiable valid sample. It is also important to bear in mind that we are dealing with people's perceptions, rather than facts – how things appear and not necessarily as they actually are.

Throughout the report, use is made of verbatim comments from participants from across the discussion groups and in-depth interviews. Where this is the case, it is important to remember that the views expressed do not always represent the views of the group as a whole. However, in each case the verbatim is reflective of, at least, a small number of participants.

Executive summary

Executive summary

The research

- In September 2008 Ipsos MORI were commissioned to undertake extensive qualitative research, discussion groups and in-depth interviews with tenants in social housing, including those currently living in supported housing. This work was funded by the Tenant Services Authority.
- The overall objective of the research was to deliver a detailed understanding of the attitudes social housing tenants have towards involvement in housing management and decision-making.
- The emphasis of the research was to engage with tenants who were unlikely to be involved in civic life, as well as those who were civically 'engaged' and have experience of participating in community life. The 'engaged' citizens we spoke to were involved in one or more of a range of community activities, but these were not necessarily related to their housing.
- This report outlines what the tenants we spoke to had to say, using verbatim quotes to bring their perspectives to life. This report moves beyond description and reportage offering practical recommendations for increasing tenant involvement in the future.

Policy context

- Citizen empowerment is fast becoming a major policy area for all government departments and public services providers. This has culminated in the recent Community Empowerment White Paper, *Communities in Control* (2008), and the newly reinforced '*Duty to Involve, Consult and Inform*'.
- Over the past decade, citizen empowerment has increasingly come to be seen as both an end in itself and an integral mechanism for delivering effective public services tailored to the needs of those who use them.
- This shift in the public policy landscape is also reflected in the housing sector where significant policy changes have taken place in recent years. As a result of the Cave Review (2006) and the consequent Housing and Regeneration Bill (2007), housing policy for social housing tenants, in particular, has undergone

a change of focus. Tenant involvement in housing decision-making is now perceived to be a central element of good service delivery.

- The Housing and Regeneration Bill (2007) has established the Tenant Services Authority (TSA) - the new housing regulator. One key objective for the TSA will be 'to ensure that tenants of social housing have the opportunity to be involved in its management'.
- Recent research, such as that undertaken by the National Consumer Council (2006)¹, indicates that while tenants understand the value of involvement, they are cynical about how it's undertaken. Citizenship Survey 2008 data shows, however, that tenants want greater opportunities to participate in effective decision-making and more varied ways of getting involved in decisions regarding their housing.

Key findings

Tenants want to be more involved in housing management

- Many tenants express interest in being more involved in housing management but they also question the influence their own involvement can have, leading some to be indifferent towards involvement opportunities.
- Most of the tenants irrespective of being engaged or not, consider involvement to be a social good in itself and something to be encouraged by housing providers. But many are unlikely to get involved themselves despite this.
- While tenants value involvement in itself, most value it as a mechanism for pushing up the overall quality of housing provision. This is particularly true of tenants who were dissatisfied with their housing provider. However, this statement was more likely to be based on perception, not actual experience.
- However, there were a minority of examples among 'engaged tenants' that being involved in housing management has had a positive impact on the overall standard of the housing and services delivered by their landlord. Where this is the case, tenant satisfaction with their landlord is improved as a result.

Involvement and satisfaction appear to be linked

¹ National Consumer Council (2006). 'What Tenants Want'. A report by the Tenant Involvement Commission.

- Our research suggests a tangible link - but not necessarily a causality - between satisfaction and involvement in general, reinforcing a key finding from the Ipsos MORI report, *Searching for the Impact of Empowerment* (2008), which shows citizen involvement has a positive impact on key quality of life measures such as social capital.
- From the evidence presented, housing providers who are most keen to involve their tenants in housing management also tended to have the most satisfied tenants.
- Our research also indicates that tenants with a good relationship with their provider were also more likely to feel empowered and involved. By contrast, tenants who were particularly dissatisfied with their landlord were more likely to feel disempowered and lacking in influence.

Involvement, power, and influence

- Feelings of power and influence among tenants also appear related to how tenants perceive involvement. It is strongly felt that involvement must offer genuine transfers of power to service users.
- Many tenants expressed a lack of interest in getting involved in housing management because they strongly felt their housing provider would not be interested in their views, or would not concede any power to them. This led particularly disengaged tenants to be disillusioned with participation in general.
- It is significant, however, that this was not typical of tenants with experience of tenant involvement. These tenants were far more likely to be advocates of involvement for a number of reasons. Most notably:
 - Their experience of involvement challenged negative preconceptions of who actually gets involved (i.e. they are made up of people who actually want to make a positive difference to society not just be nosey).
 - They generally felt that they did have some influence.
 - It brought them closer to their housing provider.

Barriers to involvement: may not be needed if service is already good

- Our research suggests that a perceived lack of need for involvement in housing decision-making is a barrier for some tenants. A minority of tenants did not get involved because they were already satisfied with the service they were receiving. As such, non-involvement sometimes represents the success of service provision and not a failure on the part of housing providers to get local tenants involved in decision-making.

Barriers to involvement: a sense of disengagement

- Overall, the majority of tenants feel disempowered irrespective of being engaged or not. Supported housing tenants proved to be a strong exception to the rule. Many of these tenants had involvement mechanisms provided for them as an element of their specialised housing provision. They were invariably intimately engaged in these mechanisms and supported them.
- For those tenants who did feel disempowered, this appears to be based on strong perceptions of what tenants groups do and who is in them. In practical terms this means that tenants frequently overestimate the amount of time required to be 'involved'.
- Many tenants thought their disengagement from housing management decision-making was a reflection of their wider marginalisation in society in general. The importance of this being that, in the context of involvement and empowerment, housing exacerbates wider feelings of disempowerment.

Barriers to involvement: justification for disengagement and the stigma of being involved

- Some tenants also spoke of a stigma being attached to those who become involved in civic activities who are generally perceived by fellow tenants to be 'nosey' and 'busybodies'. This was argued to be a deterrent preventing some tenants from getting more involved in housing decision-making.
- Many tenants said that there was a stigma attached to involvement within their local communities, specifically the perception that being involved means tenants must be 'busybodies' who interfere in other people's business. This

was, however, more true of disengaged tenants who claim this deterred them from becoming involved.

- Some tenants exaggerate the homogeneity of the 'active citizen' to justify why they do not get involved on the basis of feeling excluded, and frequently resort to perceptions of the stereotypical 'do-gooder' who is white, fairly well-off and retired.
- Tenant perceptions of those who get involved in housing management were very different depending on levels of engagement. Disengaged tenants were far more likely to think negatively of those who get involved while valuing involvement itself.
- This odd paradox or inconsistency highlights a central finding. Many of the tenants who are not involved frequently resort to justifications for their own disengagement.
- This highlights a pressure – perceived by these tenants - to get involved in housing management. But it also highlights a gap between what people say and what people do. For example, while almost all tenants think people should have more of a say in how their housing is managed, the majority do not actually get involved themselves, and often resort to justifications to explain why that is.

Barriers to involvement: lack of knowledge

- The majority of tenants participating in the research believed that there are not enough opportunities to get involved in decision-making in general, including housing management.
- Tenants generally have low *awareness* and *understanding* of the meaning of involvement and engagement. This was evident in their lack of knowledge of the *language* of engagement, and their lack of *experiences* of structured involvement (e.g. board membership of a housing association, membership of tenants association). These are significant barriers to increasing the number of tenants interested and involved in housing decision-making.
- Many tenants had difficulty conceptualising what tenant involvement was and the purpose of it. While this was less true of our 'engaged tenants', only a minority of this group of tenants can be said to be knowledgeable and/or have a very good understanding of involvement opportunities in general. Only a

small group of supported housing tenants could be considered very knowledgeable in this context.

- Importantly, most tenants lack an understanding of the involvement opportunities and mechanisms open to local people, often reducing involvement to tenants associations.

Need for realism: not all tenants will get involved

- Our research suggests that there is a 'ceiling' on how many tenants will realistically get involved. While tenants are generally interested in being more involved in housing management, housing providers also need to be realistic about how involved tenants actually want to be.
- To some extent, this 'ceiling to participation' is related to levels of satisfaction with their housing provider and local environment. It is reasonable – based on this research – to suggest that some tenants do not get involved in housing management because they are content with their current situation and do not feel they need to get involved to improve their lot.
- The research also suggests that only a small proportion of tenants would be likely to show a sustained commitment to active participation reflecting a wider trend in research surrounding civic participation. This is not because tenant involvement is not important to tenants. But it rightly suggests that it is less important than other key quality of life measures.
- For the majority of tenants, the ideal model involvement would be a representative body or group who represented their interests with the provision that tenants had real control and influence over the representative body.

The link between involvement and satisfaction with landlord

- Our research also suggests that in exemplary cases where involvement practices were strong (TMOs, supported housing), 'good' involvement can improve tenants' understanding of engagement practices and their levels of overall satisfaction with the landlord.

1. Introduction

1. Introduction

1.1 Policy context

Power from the bottom up

In July this year, the much anticipated Empowerment White Paper, *Communities in Control*, was published, outlining government's commitment to enhancing and strengthening localised forms of citizen and community empowerment.

The desirability of citizen empowerment is a rare example of political consensus. Today, all the major political parties strongly support the ideal of a stronger more organic form of local governance based on the shared responsibility and engagement of local people.

Since 1997, government has undertaken a wide range of reforms which seek to build more citizen-focused public services, and strengthen accountability. Central to all this is the belief that local communities are likely to be most effective at dealing with their own problems. They have the most intricate knowledge of their own neighbourhoods and are uniquely placed to understand both the problems and the potential solutions.

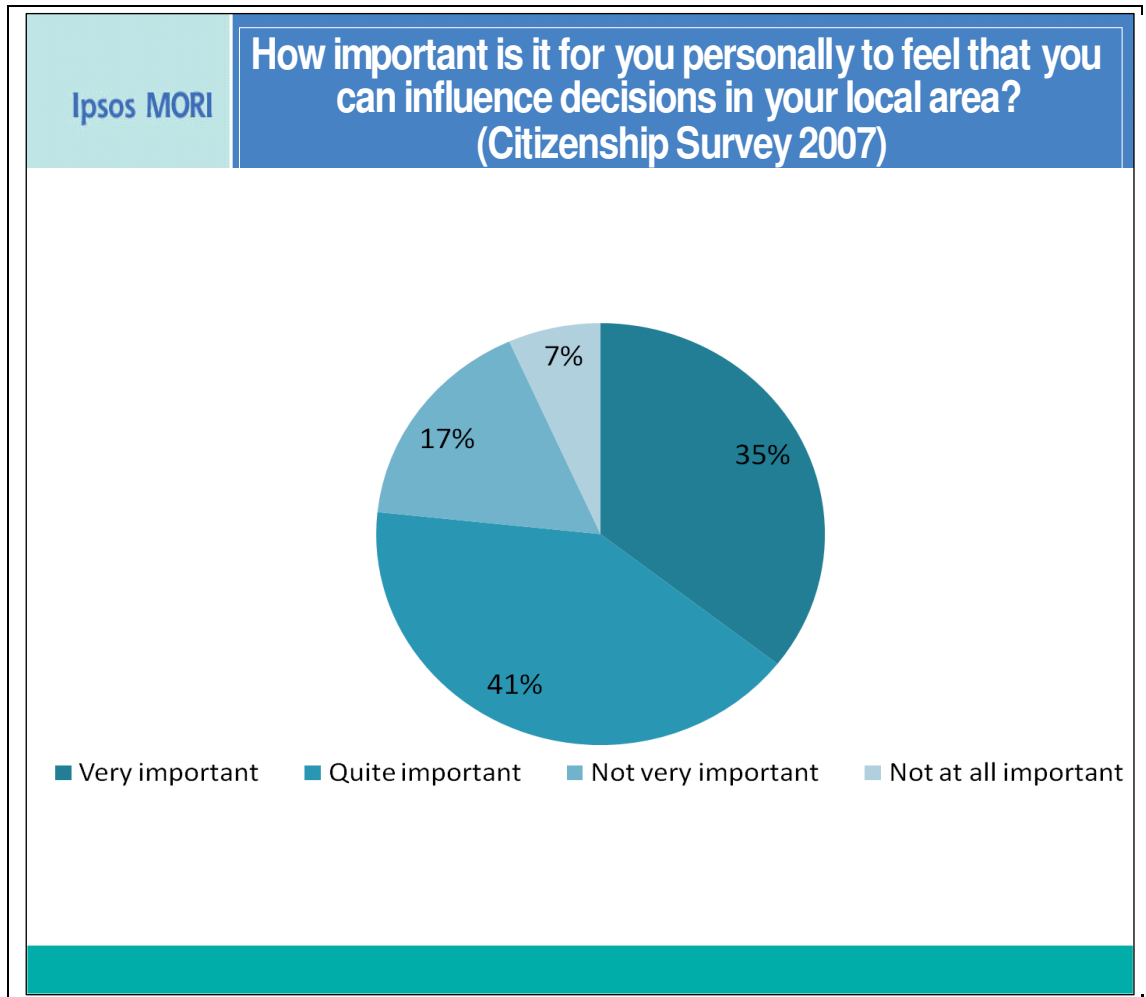
The cross-government 'empowerment agenda' will continue to reshape the way all public services, including social housing providers, engage and consult with local communities and tenants. Tenants, service users and tax-paying citizens can no longer be treated as passive consumers. As a recent Ipsos MORI report, *Socio-Political Influencers (2007)*, argues:

'As private sector products and services are becoming more personalised, consumers are becoming more demanding not only of the private sector, but also of public services. Where previously a one-size-fits-all approach could have been acceptable, there is now general agreement across all political parties that choice, voice and empowerment are vital elements of successful public services'

Most importantly, however, the 'empowerment agenda' would seem to be fuelled by a genuine desire from citizens to have greater influence and control over the decisions

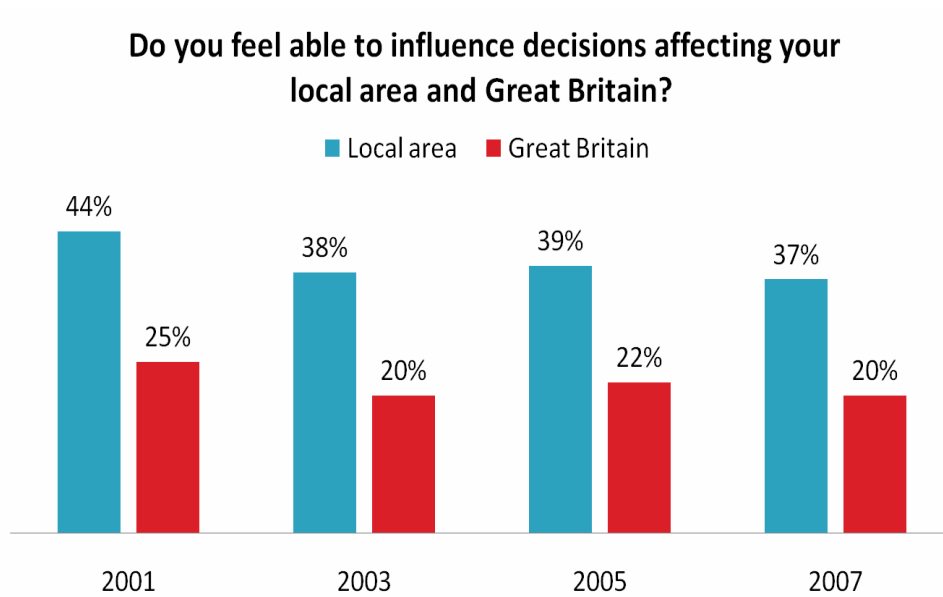
that impact on their everyday lives. The following chart illustrates survey data showing this growing desire for influence and interest in participative democratic practices:

Chart 1: People want influence over local decision-making



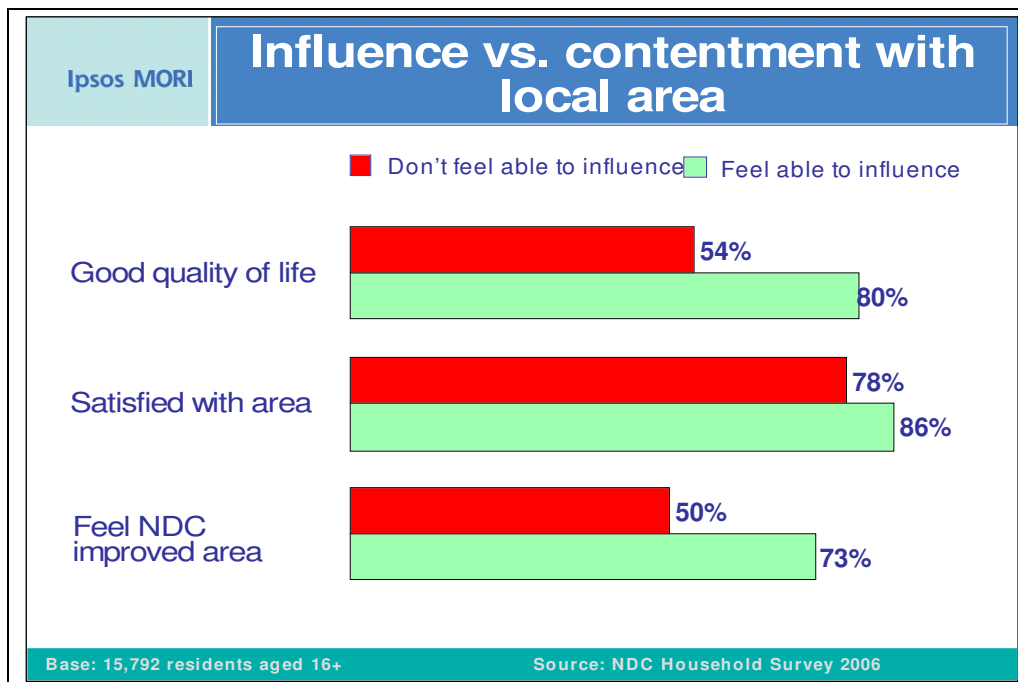
Yet there is a strange paradox. Despite the increased importance of citizen empowerment and the public sector's experimentation with methods of harnessing direct and participative democracy, recent studies of engagement and empowerment show a *decline in the perception of personal influence and empowerment* among UK citizens. This is vividly articulated in recent Citizenship Survey data below:

Chart 3: Decline in subjective empowerment



This is vital because we know that *perceptions of involvement and personal influence are related to levels of satisfaction levels with public services* as highlighted in a recent Ipsos MORI report, *Searching for the Impact of Empowerment (2008)*.

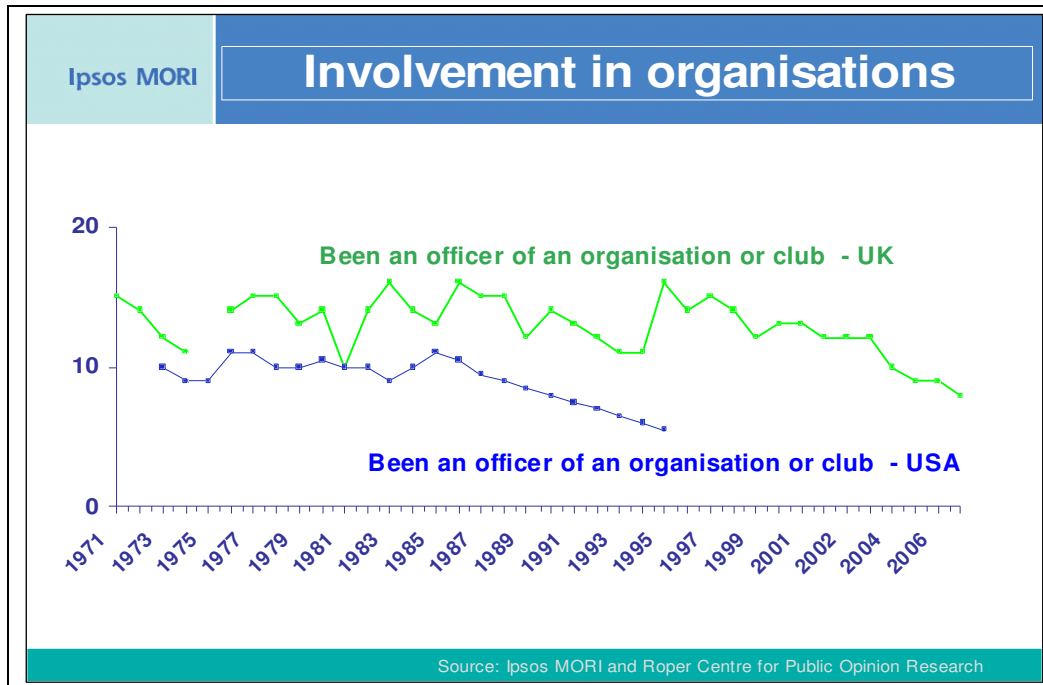
Chart 4: Perceptions of influence increase personal satisfaction



Furthermore, there is mounting evidence that the erosion of traditional forms of civic participation such as General Elections also appear to be

driving the demand of citizens to be involved in local decision-making processes.

Chart 5: Declining involvement in organisations



But this thirst for direct forms of involvement in public service delivery such as Tenants Associations (TA) or Tenant Management Organisations (TMO) needs to be tempered with a healthy dose of realism regarding its limits and possibilities – a finding central to this report on tenant involvement.

The realities of involvement

Much recent research suggests that only a small proportion of the British public are actually civically engaged on a regular basis. Furthermore, those who tend to get involved are often disproportionately well off, middle aged and white: only one percent of members of minority ethnic groups are activists and of those without qualifications three percent are activists compared to twenty-six percent for those with postgraduate degrees (ODPM 2006).

Ipsos MORI’s latest report on community empowerment cited earlier also highlights a significant gap between what people say about wanting to get involved in civic life and what they actually do as the following three charts demonstrate:

Chart 6: People like the idea participating in local decision-making in principle

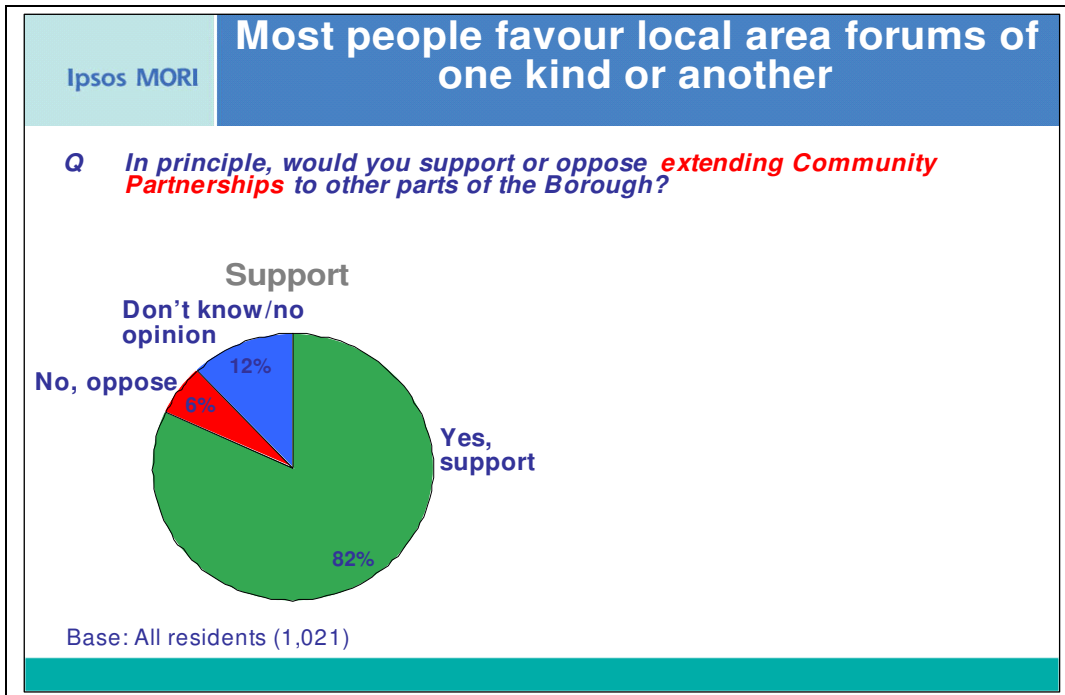


Chart 7: Fewer people are actually interested in personal involvement

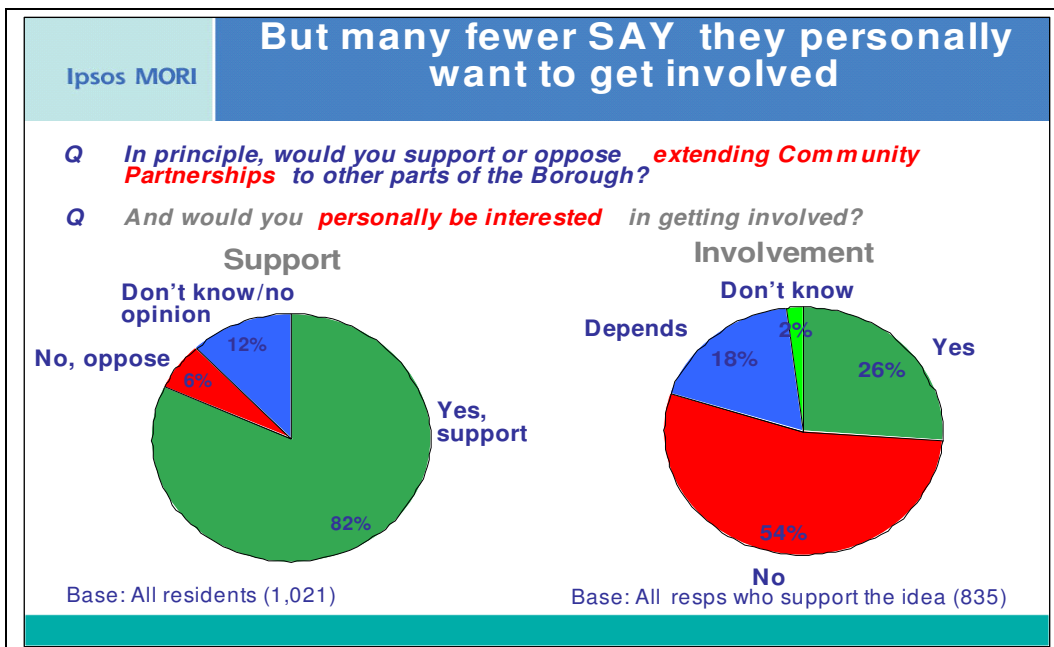
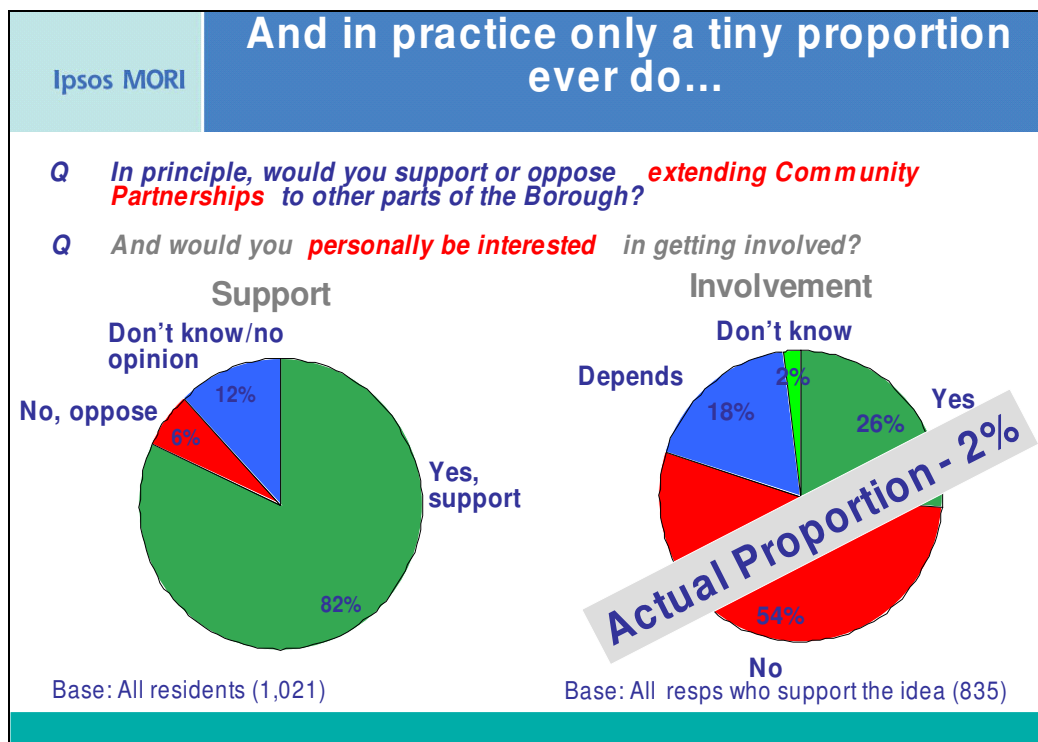


Chart 8: Significantly few people actually get involved



These findings all find their way into this report. But as it also shows, we need to resist the idea that low participation rates equate to a lack of interest in becoming involved in housing management.

Tenant involvement: empowerment in social housing

In this context, and as this research report illustrates, the housing sector acts as a cipher for wider public policy.

Community participation has been central to housing policy debate for at least two decades (Rogers and Robinson, 2004). But it was the publication of the Cave Review (2006) that brought tenant involvement and empowerment to the centre stage of the housing agenda. One of the Cave Review's three over-arching objectives for the new regulatory system for social housing was 'to empower and protect tenants' (CLG, 2007). In reality, this meant a move away from the 'consumer protection' model, which compensated when the system failed, to one of 'empowerment', where tenants would contribute to creating more effective services. Cave's recommendations are now part of legislation outlined in the Housing and Regeneration Bill (2007), and tenant involvement and empowerment is now a key performance indicator for all social housing providers.

Data from the Citizenship Survey (2007) shows that 19 per cent of all people involved in civic activism are involved in a tenants' committee. Other research also suggests that there are roughly 20,000 tenant representatives performing lay governance roles on housing association management committees and tenant management boards (Skidmore et al, 2006).

But tenant involvement and participation is very broad, comprising many different roles of varying degrees of meaningful influence and responsibility. These include:

- Social landlords consulting tenants (e.g. surveys and open meetings).
- Involving tenants in decision-making (e.g. tenant membership on housing management boards).
- Tenant management organisations (e.g. tenants have landlord functions managing their own housing).

For local authorities, tenant satisfaction data from three waves of BVPI (Best Value Performance Indicator) surveys indicate a high and very stable pattern of satisfaction being achieved over time. Some 77% of tenants are satisfied with the services provided by their landlord overall, exactly the same as in 2000/01 and 2003/04.

Indeed, data taken from the *What Tenants Want* (NCC, 2006)² report shows that nationally housing association surveys have found that around 78% of tenants consider themselves very or fairly satisfied with the overall service their landlord provides. Quantitative research carried out by Ipsos MORI also shows relatively high tenant satisfaction with the opportunities available for involvement in housing decision-making³. It is important to also note, however, that tenant satisfaction – both with their landlord and with opportunities for involvement in housing management – varies according to a range of socio-demographic and attitudinal factors.

Ethnicity is one such example. Data taken from the National Housing Federation's Feedback Service, for example, which uses the STATUS questionnaire for the period 2002-2005, shows BME tenants (including 'white Irish' and 'white other') to be significantly less satisfied with their housing – with 67% being satisfied with the overall service of their landlord compared to 78% of white British tenants. Furthermore, the same dataset shows BME tenants also to be less satisfied with opportunities for

² 'What Tenants Want', 2006, National Consumer Council/ Audit Commission.

participation in management and decision-making, with 50% being satisfied compared to 53% of white British tenants.

What is also interesting about the data on satisfaction with opportunities for participation is the degree of ambivalence that tenants show. Responses to this question nearly always include around a half of tenants saying either 'don't know' or that they are neither satisfied nor dissatisfied, which may reflect a wider finding in this research that the majority of tenants lack a substantial understanding of what involvement is and what involvement opportunities are there for the taking.

1.2 Key questions and objectives for this research

Against this background and policy context, the purpose of the research was to deliver a detailed understanding of the attitudes social housing tenants have towards involvement in housing management and decision-making.

More specifically, our programme of research explored the following key questions:

- What do tenants understand and know about involvement in the housing sector and more generally?
- How involved do tenants want to be in housing management?
- What do tenants really want in terms of involvement? In what circumstances, relating to what issues?
- What methods of involvement are most interesting to tenants and why? What are the main concerns/barriers to involvement?
- Why do some tenants participate more than others and how can this be challenged?
- When only some tenants get involved, how do other tenants feel about this?
- What are the perceptions of 'active tenants' among those who are neither interested nor currently involved in housing management?
- How involved are tenants prepared to be? What support/guidance/information would be needed?
- Do tenants value involvement as an end in itself that should be more widely encouraged?

1.3 Methodological approach

Qualitative methodology

In order to meet the challenging objectives and aims of the research, we used a range of qualitative research techniques and methods. In summary, our methodology consisted of:

- **12 extended discussion groups:** each consisting of between eight and 11 participants.
- **Ten paired in-depth interviews:** four of which were with tenants living in supported housing.
- **Pre-task:** each tenant completed a 'drivers for change' questionnaire in advance of the discussion groups.

1.4 Research design

Recruitment

Participants living in social housing were recruited according to two main key criteria: their level of satisfaction with their housing provider, and their level of 'involvement'. Participant satisfaction was important because, as we have seen in the Introduction, satisfaction levels have a powerful influence on levels of participation.

In order to recruit 'involved' and 'disengaged' citizens, we asked people about their level of involvement with community groups, trade unions, local council meetings and tenants associations, among many other possible roles. This meant that we were speaking to tenants who were 'engaged' citizens. But it is important to note that they were not necessarily engaged in civic activities, which related to their housing.

Recruiting the 'disengaged' proved a considerable challenge as, by definition, they were disinterested in being involved. This factor was important for the research as it exemplified the difficulties of generating a response for participatory activities among social housing tenants.

Discussion groups

We conducted 12 discussion groups with social housing tenants in Coventry, Leeds and London (Lambeth). Participants included a mix of tenants in local authority and housing association properties.

The following table gives a more detailed breakdown of quotas for each group.

Single depth and paired depth interviews

In addition to the discussion groups, we conducted single and paired depth interviews in order to extend the reach of the research to rural areas and to include tenants in supported housing. In total we interviewed four pairs in supported housing.

The following table gives details of these depth interviews.

9 x paired depth interviews				
Interview Number	Involvement type	Location	Socio-economic background	Supported housing
1	Disengaged	Warwickshire	E	Yes
2	Disengaged	Warwickshire	C2	
3	Engaged	Warwickshire	C2	
4	Engaged	Selby	E	Yes
5	Disengaged	Selby	D	
6	Engaged	Selby	D	
7	Disengaged	Taunton	E	Yes
8	Engaged	Taunton	D	
9	Engaged	London	E	Yes
2 x single depth interviews				
1	Engaged	Selby	C1	
2	Disengaged	Taunton	C2	

Qualitative research uses smaller samples than quantitative methodologies, and is chosen purposively to ensure a wide range of views within the sample.

The research is illustrative, seeking to identifying the *full depth* of views, opinions and experiences among claimants; rather than seeking to provide statistical measures of the incidence of such views, opinions and experiences across all tenants living in social housing. It is crucial to note that where these experiences are concerned, they are expressed as tenants' perceptions, and are not facts, although perceptions *are* often thought of as facts to those who hold them. Nonetheless, the difference between those private perceptions and an objective truth must be taken into account when interpreting the research findings.

Throughout the report, verbatim comments have been used in an illustrative capacity to support findings. Where quotations have been used, the respondent's attributes are given in the following order:

- Gender.
- Age group.
- Satisfied/dissatisfied.
- Engagement type.

For example: Female, 35-54, satisfied, disengaged

Unless otherwise stated all quotes are from group discussions.

2. Perceptions of involvement

2. Perceptions of involvement

2.1 Introduction

In this chapter we will examine what tenants want from involvement, if anything at all, and the perceptions they have of involvement. We know from experience that public perception and reality are often very different things. For example, all objective research shows that crime has significantly fallen in the past decade, yet the general public are more likely to believe in the existence of ghosts.⁴

We have found with this research that a 'perception gap' also exists around the issue of tenant involvement. Tenant perceptions of a range of issues are a key factor influencing why some tenants choose to engage and why many don't, why some never will, and why many feel they can't.

In the case of 'disengaged' tenants, who have not been involved in a community activity before, their perceptions may be shaped by *preconceptions* about what a tenants' meeting might be like, or what it might achieve. On the other hand, some 'disengaged' tenants, mainly those who are satisfied with their housing, expressed *indifference* to tenant involvement not because they dislike the idea, but because they question the impact their involvement could have in reality.

The case of 'engaged' tenants, who have taken part in a community activity recently, or may even be involved in participatory housing activities, was different again. Their perceptions were often shaped by their *experiences* of involvement, which were generally positive in nature.

Expectations of involvement are also very important. To a great many tenants, the desire for choice and control is very much secondary to the desire to see improved services. As such, their expectations of involvement are that it should drive up standards, or, for some tenants, that it should not be necessary at all. We will examine each of these aspects in turn.

⁴ Ipsos MORI (2008). Closing the Gaps: Perceptions of Crime. A report for the Home Office.

2.2 Do tenants want to be involved?

Level of interest in involvement

This research suggests that many tenants, both those who are currently engaged and have never been engaged, want to be more involved in housing management because they want more of a say over important factors that impact on their lives.

'Tenants should have say over how things are run. It's part of being in a democracy. Even if most don't give a shit, they should at least have the opportunity to be involved'

Male, 18-24, dissatisfied, engaged

'I want to be involved. I never have been involved before but not because I haven't wanted to. I think everyone wants some control over where they live and how safe your area is. If being involved in a tenants group or something can give me that I'll do it'

Female, 34-54, dissatisfied, disengaged

Many tenants, in particular those who are or have been engaged in civic activity in the past, are more likely to value involvement as a social good to be encouraged and end in itself. However, there were also numerous tenants who were distinctly socially excluded by all traditional measurements, who also valued involvement in itself even if their understanding of involvement itself was limited.

'People should be involved. We know what needs to be done. Why shouldn't we? It's our society'

Male, 55+, satisfied, engaged

'I have to admit that all this is new to me. But it makes sense doesn't it. Getting involved and having your say...it's about belonging to something and contributing somehow. But how I do that, I don't know'

Male, 34-54, satisfied, disengaged

Impact and value of involvement

Many of the findings from this research reinforces central arguments in favour of citizen empowerment that we documented in the policy context section (see Section 1.1). Indeed, many of the tenants we spoke to – engaged and disengaged – argue that when tenant involvement mechanisms deliver what they should do (i.e. de facto and subjective empowerment to tenants), increased tenant involvement in housing management and public service delivery more generally is perceived to have a number of significant benefits:

- It can improve the services themselves because tenants know what they need.
- It can improve the way they perceive their landlord and be a solid basis for developing more positive, durable relationships between tenants and landlords.
- It can make tenants feel more attached and committed to improving the overall living standards of their local community.
- It can increase the social capital of local public service providers (e.g. housing association, local council etc).

However, it should be noted that engaged tenants – particularly supported housing tenants – were more likely to state the above. Thus suggesting a correlation between understanding of involvement and advocacy. Furthermore, the benefits of involvement were often only perceived by more disengaged tenants when probed, often in detail.

‘Involvement and engagement...it’s about putting the people first; letting them decide how things are run...and if your housing association or council give you that chance you need to take it. And it makes you feel better about them as well, which is a good thing’

Female, 18-34, satisfied, engaged

Unsurprising given this interest in involvement, many of the tenants we spoke to were critical of the amount of involvement opportunities available to them and questioned to what extent housing providers genuinely want their tenants to have influence over housing management.

'I want to be involved – I've looked. But they [the housing association] either don't want you to get involved or they are very bad at communicating what opportunities there are. Especially for old people like us. We have the will but not the legs!'

Male, 55+, dissatisfied, engaged

It should be noted, however, that while this cynicism was not specific to disengaged tenants, it was certainly more pronounced among those who had no experience of having been involved in housing management.

'They couldn't care less. Why do they care what I think or want me involved? I'm just a single mother with no morals to them'

Female, 34-54, dissatisfied, disengaged

The need for realism

There were examples of more engaged tenants who became despondent and apathetic about the value of involvement as a result of direct experience with involvement mechanisms. But these were a minority.

'Involvement is a good idea. But in practice I just wasn't sure we had much authority. Without this what's the point? Actually...there is a point – I'm being too cynical - but this is what is really needed...more power'

Female, 55+, satisfied, engaged

However, one of the common threads running through this research is to be realistic about the extent to which tenants are likely to actually get involved in tenant or civic activities on a consistent basis.

Indeed, while involvement may be important to a lot of tenants, it is unsurprisingly less important to them than a good quality of housing. The following comment illustrates this view:

'If everything was working properly, why would we even need a tenants' association? We shouldn't need one at all if the Housing Association did their job!'

Female, 18-34, dissatisfied, disengaged

For many, especially the 'disengaged', involvement is considered secondary to quality of service, and some tenants do not even see involvement as a means to raising standards. These tenants would fit into our 'resigned but ranting' type (see Chapter 4) as they are dissatisfied, but are disinterested in involvement.

'Look...I'm not saying all this stuff (involvement) is rubbish. I'm just saying that when you live in a little, crappy flat like I do, you want to have somewhere decent to live first. That is the bottom line for everyone'

Male, 34-54, dissatisfied, disengaged

Furthermore, those tenants who are very satisfied with their housing see no need for involvement, although, as we have seen, they may be reaping the benefits of others' efforts in being involved.

For many tenants, their expectations of involvement are that it should deliver a better quality of housing. This ideal is consistent across highly-engaged participants in TMO's and those who are very resistant to tenant involvement, as the following comments illustrate:

Moderator: 'What is the main aim of your TMO?'

Participant: 'We're trying to make things better in the community. Make it a safer place to live'

Moderator: 'So not just for the sake of being involved'

Participant: 'Of course not'

Male, 55+, satisfied, engaged

'In an ideal world, we wouldn't need a Tenants' Association. All I've got to do is go to the housing executive, and say, excuse me, my wall's fallen down, and can you come and sort it out? If they got it done...then you wouldn't need anybody to represent you, would you?'

Male, 55+, dissatisfied, engaged

For those tenants who do want to be involved, there is a big difference between superficial engagement - simply getting people to attend a meeting once - and long-term commitment to involvement. This long-term commitment is dependent on tenants buying into the concept that involvement is a good idea in order to break down the preconceptions that sustain indifference and negative perceptions.

Our research suggests that while some tenants do buy-in to the value of involvement, the next step – if the objective is to increase tenant involvement in housing management - is to both educate tenants about the benefits of involvement and the availability of involvement mechanisms, while ensuring that involvement mechanisms themselves actually deliver empowerment to tenants.

'The fact is a lot of people don't really know enough to say if something like this (involvement) is a good idea. We need to be better educated about it. But I think this is our responsibility as well as the council's even though they are very poor at this'

Female, 18-34, dissatisfied, disengaged

2.3 What tenants want from involvement

Better communication of involvement opportunities

Tenants feel that they have limited opportunities for involvement and that they are not well-informed about the opportunities that do exist.

'I think every time they're having a meeting it should be advertised about...we're having a meeting, do you want to come and have your say? And that should be on every meeting'

Male, 55+, dissatisfied, disengaged

As such, tenants want better communication and information provision with regards to the involvement opportunities available to them. This is felt by many tenants to be the most important change in practice required.

Alongside better communication of what involvement is available, the more disengaged tenants comment that it would be equally beneficial to have better documentation of 'positive involvement experiences' to boost the image of involvement and help combat the negative perceptions held by some tenants. The following comment illustrates this view:

'When you see things that are being done as well, I think that is a big incentive. I know that I am definitely going to join my tenants' group now because my Housing Association are making an effort ... I think that is a big thing for people'

Female, 35-54, disengaged

Developing the role of a tenant spokesperson

The idea of a tenant spokesperson was a popular one; tenants feel this could help ensure that their opinions and ideas were raised more effectively. The key to this being successful is deemed to depend on the relative power of the spokesperson. Tenants want it to be someone who is respected by tenants, who can articulate their opinions and ideas, and, crucially, who is taken seriously by the housing providers.

'If it was somebody you respected they'd soon find people to support them, you know, because they'd know everybody'

Male, 55+, dissatisfied, engaged

Removing practical barriers

Tenants feel strongly that housing providers could do a lot to remove practical barriers to involvement. Suggestions included combining such involvement alongside other activities such as events for children and teenagers or coffee mornings. They also suggested that housing providers could pay for the cost of transport for tenants to attend meetings and provide support to help with childcare. Tenants also feel that it is important to have a central location as a focal point for social gatherings, which would function as a home for tenants' group meetings but also other social functions:

'It is good when it is also a social event and when you don't just go there for just one purpose. Also to meet people. I think that is an extra incentive to go there. It is like going to the gym with your friends really'

Female, 35-54, disengaged

Addressing such barriers would also go some way to addressing other issues of exclusion which prevent tenants participating.

Ensuring that a good relationship with the provider is in place

Tenants hold strong views that tenants' groups should not be toothless. They want to have a degree of power, but also a developed working relationship with their provider. This is particularly important for the efficacy of tenant's representatives.

'I think it comes down to getting the link right between the tenants' association and the housing associations themselves, that's where the problem is, and they've got to manage that'

Male, 55+, dissatisfied, disengaged

Face-to-face engagement

Tenants are keen on the idea of face-to-face engagement, in which many felt housing officers had an important role to play. Tenants feel that housing officers have become increasingly invisible and they miss the face-to-face contact which some feel was symbolic of housing estate management in the past. The following comments illustrate this view.

'I think they should knock on everybody's door and ask everybody's opinion instead of sitting round a table just asking the minority who, they choose, which are like old people and that'

Female, 35-55, dissatisfied, disengaged

'Offer a choice to tenants. Because as we say, we are all individuals and we all relate to people differently. Some people like to see people and talk to them on a one to one, sometimes you need to have that one to one because the issues

that you have are not easy to talk about certain things over the phone, you know'

Female, 35-54, dissatisfied, disengaged

Involving children and young people

Many parents feel strongly that their children are not consulted about plans in the community. It is felt that this is an important way of ensuring more sustained involvement in the community from younger people who are currently not involved in any way. However, it is important to note that this is the view of parents and not necessarily the children themselves.

This was also suggested by those older tenants who were not sceptical about success in this area. Some commented that it may be a good idea to engage older children at school to ensure their participation.

'Let our kids have a say. They've got to live there and they've got to grow up there'

Female, 35-54, disengaged

2.4 The power of preconceptions

While our research clearly shows a desire among tenants to be more involved in housing decision-making, there is also an important difference between 'engaged' and 'disengaged' citizens when we consider their views on involvement.

For those tenants who are not involved in community activities at all, their views of tenant involvement are often based on negative preconceptions of involvement - rather than experience. These preconceptions often have their roots in hearsay, which can play a powerful role in discouraging tenant involvement:

'You get a newsletter telling you where you can go to the tenants' association but like everybody said here they go and they go two or three times. I've been told by people who's been and they've said it's just falling on deaf ears'

Female, 34-55, engaged

These negative preconceptions of what tenant involvement is like - which are often strong and emotive - appear to be interlinked with tenants' negative perceptions of how others within their community view them. The following comment by a young, disengaged woman commenting on older people's dominance of tenants' groups illustrates this point:

'Younger people are always cast out more than an old person, and they'll bully the younger person into submission'

Female, 18-34, satisfied, disengaged

Disengaged, dissatisfied tenants' views of tenant involvement were very much shaped by a range of preconceptions about involvement. In many cases, these preconceptions became important attitudinal barriers to involvement, which we will explore in detail in the following chapter.

2.5 The fact of indifference

Many disengaged tenants, and a minority who were engaged, expressed indifference towards involvement opportunities. However, this tenant indifference clothes a wider range of subtler perceptions, which ranged from being perfectly satisfied with their housing to disempowerment and social differences.

Some tenants commented that those tenants who cause problems in communities were least likely to get involved because their attitudes were inherently anti-social and not conducive to community cohesion. The following comment illustrates this view of tenant apathy:

'By default a lot of people that wouldn't get involved are the people that are probably the main cause of the problem, because they're not interested'

Male, 55+, satisfied, engaged

But some tenants saw indifference as a symptom of disempowerment, as the following comments illustrate:

'People don't think they can make a difference'

Female, 35-54, disengaged

'There are meetings at the Church for instance, where tenants can go and actually air their views. But they always say, oh gosh no, what a waste of time, people won't listen to me, what is the point, you know. And they really have no hope that things can change and can get better, so they don't even try'

Female, 35-54, disengaged

In some cases, indifference was linked to a lack of information and knowledge about involvement, as the following comment illustrates:

'[The Tenants Association] is like an irrelevancy, almost...I hadn't got a clue who's on it anyway, and I've never ever been told who's on it, so I don't know anything about it'

Male, 34-54, satisfied, disengaged

Finally, there are those who are perfectly satisfied with their housing, and for this reason don't see the point of taking part:

'I get the newsletter, but that's it. It says something about the tenants' association, yeah, but I don't see the point'

Female, 34-54, satisfied, disengaged

These comments illustrate that the apathy of the large group of tenants who express indifference to tenant involvement may be driven by a range of factors. These will be explored further in Chapter 4, where we develop a typology of tenant behaviour.

It should be noted, however, that while tenants question the impact and influence of tenant involvement, the vast majority still value involvement and think it should be encouraged.

'I think involvement is very important. But you need to see that you can make a difference and I'm not sure that you can'

Male, 60+, dissatisfied, engaged

2.6 The power of experiences

A great many of 'disengaged' tenants have minimal experience of involvement at work, in their social life or in their community. This appears to be linked to their generally narrow perceptions of involvement, which were generally confined to a scant knowledge or understanding of formal channels such as tenant meetings.

Many of these disengaged tenants did not see taking part in alternative, less formal types of involvement, such as coffee mornings or youth participation events, as 'getting involved'. For these tenants, their narrow perceptions of involvement created strong imaginative constraints, preventing tenants from considering the possibilities of involvement and conceptualising their relationship with their housing provider on anything other than an individual basis:

'The only time you see the top knobs is if you don't pay your rent on time and you are behind in your arrears...they are soon knocking at your door'

Female, 35-54, dissatisfied, disengaged

For tenants who were involved, experiences of involvement are also important. Some 'engaged' tenants feel strongly that their views will not be acted upon even if they were voiced in a suitable tenant's forum, as illustrated by the following comments:

'The housing association wanted the meeting but they weren't interested in really what tenants were saying; they didn't care'

Female, 35-54, satisfied, engaged

'The trouble with these housing associations is that they invite you to a meeting, you say what you've got to say at that meeting, then, what you've said is ignored anyway. They [housing providers] just go their own little way'

Male, 55+, dissatisfied, engaged

These comments suggest that 'bad' experiences of involvement in housing shape perceptions of involvement, which go on to create significant barriers to tenants being involved. This is notable among 'engaged' tenants, who may be involved in other community activities, but find themselves disillusioned by being involved in their housing. This important barrier to involvement is discussed further in Chapter 3.

However, this is not true of all engaged tenants. Indeed, the majority of engaged tenants were also far more likely to advocate tenant involvement than any other group, suggesting that opportunities to actually get involved are worthwhile. Specific reasons were offered as to why involvement is important to local people:

'At least you feel like you're doing something to improve things...and you actually see that people are trying to make a difference and not just in it for their own gain'

Female, 18-34, dissatisfied, engaged

'I can see what you are saying. But my experience is that people will listen if you should loud enough and you show you are really serious'

Male, 34-54, satisfied, engaged

2.7 Conclusion

Many tenants want to get involved, they have strong preconceptions about what involvement involves, and a wide range of responses to what involvement might mean in practice. Disengaged tenants generally have very low awareness and understanding of the meaning of involvement and engagement, and many had difficulty conceptualising what tenant involvement was and the purpose of it. And even though more engaged tenants have a better understanding of involvement, the benchmark is still low in general.

Furthermore, many disengaged tenants hold strong negative preconceptions of what a tenant involvement would be like, which are not necessarily backed up by experiences. While valuing involvement, many tenants across all demographics were indifferent to the potential impact of involvement, for a variety of reasons. And, importantly, for many tenants, involvement is perceived as a means to an end, and that end is improvements in housing provision. These preconceptions, experiences, and expectations create a range of barriers to involvement that stand in the way of and disguise a fundamentally positive attitude towards the ideal of greater tenant involvement. We will now examine these in the following chapter.

3. Barriers to involvement

3. Barriers to involvement

3.1 Introduction

Among both disengaged and engaged tenants it was clear that the perceptions and experiences outlined in the previous chapter created considerable attitudinal barriers to engagement. In some cases, these attitudinal barriers are compounded by perceived systemic inadequacies in involvement mechanisms available to tenants. In addition, tenants also experienced practical and cultural barriers to engagement, related to other factors such as their stage of life or their perception of themselves within their community.

In this chapter, we outline the key barriers experienced by those tenants who expressed an interest in being involved, or in *'having their voice heard'*, regardless of whether they were 'engaged' or 'disengaged' citizens, drawing out why these barriers mean that some tenants are more likely to get involved than others.

Where relevant, we note their relationship to general perceptions of involvement, and suggest how these barriers and concerns may shape tenant behaviour in relation to involvement. For those tenants who were indifferent to participation, some did not express any sense of a barrier to participation, whereas others expressed a sense of cultural difference (see section 3.4), which made them reluctant to participate.

3.2 Practical barriers

Tenants, both engaged and disengaged, expressed immediate practical barriers, which are perceived by tenants to limit and constrain their ability to participate. Some of these were confined to particular demographic groups and genders.

Older people

Older tenants have concerns about mobility and about leaving the house late in the evening. They are keen that tenants groups take place in a safe location within easy reach of where they live, and at a time which means they do not feel unsafe, as illustrated by the comment below:

'It would have to be at a suitable time of day...a lot of elderly people don't wish to go out in the evening once it gets dark. They're scared of going out'

Male, 55+, satisfied, disengaged

Mothers of young children

Tenants who were mothers of young children, especially younger mothers, make it very clear that they will not be able to participate unless adequate provision is made for childcare. The lack of provision by many tenants' groups is taken by many disengaged young female tenants as a sign of tenants' groups indifference to young parents. Older, engaged mothers note that other forms of community involvement take childcare needs into consideration, as illustrated below:

'For a board of governors for the primary schools, every governors' meeting's at a different time, but at least at the governors' meeting you can take your kids with you'

Female, 18-34, dissatisfied, engaged

One member of a TMO noted that her tenants' group had offered to cover the costs of childminders for those attending meetings. This had meant that parents were able to attend the group, and had resulted in considerable diversity in their tenants group. This was considered to be something that all housing providers should be doing.

Other practical concerns

Our research found that tenants considered timing to be an important practical barrier preventing them from being more involved in local decision-making.

For those tenants who work, meetings need to be held after working hours. However, it was difficult to come to a consensus about timing, as the needs of office workers, shift workers, older and younger people clashed.

'I want to be involved but I just don't have the time. Work, kids, looking after my mum...there just aren't enough hours in the day. I would need help to be able to participate fully really'

Female, 18-34, dissatisfied, disengaged

The cost of getting to meetings was also noted as a barrier, particularly by older participants with mobility requirements, who preferred to use a taxi.

'There are opportunities to get involved. But I'm excluded largely from some things because I'm an old man. I can't walk well, so I need help with transport'

Male, 55+, satisfied, engaged

Finally, location was considered important: in one case, tenants were unable to participate because tenant meetings took place in the next town, 20 miles away, because that was the location of the headquarters of the housing association.

Tenants generally agree that it is important that the location is somewhere neutral and well-known in the local community. Finally, tenants with literacy difficulties also commented that they struggled to understand written communications that advertised involvement opportunities, or disseminated tenant news.

3.3 Systemic barriers

A lack of knowledge and understanding about involvement

Many tenants – both disengaged and engaged - lack knowledge about opportunities for involvement. But while engaged tenants have some knowledge by virtue of their having attended housing meetings, for example, the majority of disengaged tenants have absolutely no knowledge or understanding of involvement at all.

On probing, many felt this was because their housing providers do not communicate with them well. Many tenants find it difficult to recall any communications about tenant involvement from their housing providers at all, as this comment illustrates:

'There's a lack of communication with the tenants. If they turned round and if they informed people more what was going on, then the chances are that people like us would get more involved.'

Female, 35-54, disengaged

Among the groups of disengaged tenants, few could recall actual involvement in housing decision-making, or knew anyone who had been involved, pointing to a paucity of actual experience of participation.

'Nah...no one. Not me. It's something other people do isn't it. You know old busybodies who have nothing better to do'

Male, 18-34, satisfied, disengaged

This means that many tenants have great difficulty conceptualising the uses and possibilities of involvement. Tenants have little exposure to involvement and participation in their personal and, in some cases, professional lives, and hence lack knowledge of how involvement can work.

'To be honest, a lot of this is just going over our heads. It's because we aren't used to being asked what we think. It feels good though'

Female, 34-54, dissatisfied, disengaged

In some cases, tenants had an immature idea of how involvement works: in their dealings with relevant housing professionals, if a request was not met, they assumed that the process was broken, furthering negative perceptions. To illustrate this gap in understanding, one group of tenants in the research recalled demanding a new playground on their estate. When the playground was not built, they went away with the perception that their housing provider did not listen to their concerns.

Furthermore, involvement is poorly perceived and understood because tenants are not conversant with the wider 'language' of involvement and engagement. Some tenants lack confidence to get involved in meetings because they are not familiar with the format of a tenants' group, and feel they will not be able to contribute correctly. They have little understanding of what would be expected of them.

'I just don't have the confidence. I'd like to. But it's full of married people who just look down on you'

Female, 18-34, satisfied, disengaged

For many, this unfamiliarity breeds negativity about the involvement process as they feel the format does not benefit their interests, feeding a 'them and us' mindset towards housing providers.

'I don't see the point. I'd just get shouted down...And the housing never listen anyway'

Female, 55+, dissatisfied, engaged

However, our research found that tenants in supported housing tended to be very different. They were generally highly knowledgeable about involvement and significantly more likely to be involved in both housing management issues and wider civic activity. This is partly because their housing providers have more developed mechanisms of involvement.

'I have been involved in lots of community work, getting my hands dirty. It gives your life meaning and helps you to have control over your life. This is important because a lot of people like me just don't have that'

Male, 28, supported housing, satisfied, engaged

Poor 'involvement' practice

As we have discussed, just as tenants' perceptions can form a barrier to involvement, so too can bad experiences of involvement. Where housing providers do not cede any power to tenants, where certain people dominated meetings or where meetings are erratic or just ineffectual, negative perceptions about involvement and strengthen this barrier to involvement.

'If the Tenants' Association had a little bit of strength and the community could see, oh, they're getting things done...what's the point in going to the Tenants' Association, shouting your mouth off, and nothing happens?'

Male, 55+, dissatisfied, engaged

3.4 Attitudinal barriers

Many participants, both engaged and disengaged, felt that involvement was just *'not for them'* even when they had expressed the views that involvement was important and that tenants should be more involved in their housing decisions.

Fear of personal accountability

Many tenants, particularly those who are engaged in other community activities, suggest that they do not want to be made accountable for housing issues in their community by being involved in a tenants' group. Although they are keen on the perceived benefits of participation, they are reluctant to taken on the responsibilities that being a local champion might entail, as the following comment illustrates:

'It could actually infringe on your personal life where, if you're involved in the tenants' association you've got people who constantly come to you with their problems'

Female, 55+, satisfied, engaged

Tenants who are engaged in housing issues also note that the fear of personal responsibility and accountability puts many tenants off taking part, even though they may claim to be interested. The following comments illustrate these frustrations:

'If they're not happy about anything they will stop you in the street and moan and groan and why can't you do this? Why can't you do that? But ask them to come to a meeting or to get involved, and they say 'oh I haven't got time''

Female, 55+, satisfied, engaged

'Become a member of the team, no pay, loads of hours, monthly meetings and you might get talked over, but apart from that it's great! Oh yeah I'll join up, yeah of course, why not?'

Male, 55+, dissatisfied, engaged

Intimidation and peer separation

Some tenants, both engaged and disengaged, expressed a reluctance to get involved for fear of reprisals or personal attacks from other tenants who might take exception to tenant involvement and respond with aggressive behaviour.

'They're afraid if somebody gets involved in something, they're going to tittle tattle back, and it will get back to the people concerned, and there's going to be reprisals'

Female, 55+, dissatisfied, engaged, paired depth interview

In particular, older women and men spoke about fear of reprisals and making themselves stand out in the community, preferring instead to '*keep themselves to themselves*'. Furthermore, some tenants feel intimidated about getting involved, suggesting that by speaking up they may be distancing themselves from their peers and associating themselves with 'busybodies':

'I think people attach a stigma [to the tenants' group]. There shouldn't be. I think a lot of people do think the people that go are interfering busybodies'

Female, 34-55, engaged

Equally, some tenants were nervous that, by becoming involved, they will be ostracised by neighbours, and seen as someone who is closer to the housing provider rather than their fellow tenants.

A lack of confidence

Lack of confidence is a personal barrier to many tenants, both engaged and disengaged, and may be related to other social dimensions, such as race, age, health and class (which we will discuss in greater detail in section 3.4).

'I know people who really, really should be in tenants' associations but could never be. Here you can talk very confidently about issues in your area, yet I can bring you about 10 or 15 people in the area who have issues but could never open their mouth in public because they are not confident enough'

Female, 35-54, satisfied, disengaged

'Some people I think you find are just quiet, they're reserved, they want to ask, they want to know but they don't know how'

Female, 55+, satisfied, engaged

Tenants generally identify with these types of people and feel strongly that these such people should be involved, and that their opinions should be taken into account.

3.5 Cultural barriers

Many tenants express the view that tenant involvement is *'not for them'* for a range of cultural reasons. These may be related to ethnicity, age, social class, but essentially relate to perceptions of a tenants' group as homogeneous and exclusive. Perceptions of other involvement groups such as Neighbourhood Watch groups and the tenants who are involved with such schemes fuel these opinions.

Ethnicity as a perceived barrier

Our research included some tenants from BME groups, notably in London, and for a few of these tenants, ethnicity proved to be an issue, where a tenants' group was dominated by one ethnic group. One tenant recalled declining an invitation to join a tenants' group because she felt uncomfortable being the only Black member of the group, despite living in a highly ethnically diverse community.

Language is a further important cultural issue. Tenants noted that there were groups in their community who did not speak English as a first language, who would have considerable difficulties being involved. This barrier serves to eliminate them from active involvement in meetings, and also raising issues regarding written communications.

'What about the Polish people? They can't get involved can they? And no-one asks them what they think...'

Male, 55+, dissatisfied, engaged

Tensions between age groups

Inter-generational strife is one major theme, expressed most notably by female tenants in the 18-34 age group and tenants in the 55+ age group. Younger female tenants, many of whom have small children, feel a strong sense of tension between generations in their community. This is manifest in their feeling of being 'judged' and ignored by the types of people whom they perceive make up tenants associations. The following comments illustrate these attitudes:

'There could be working class [at the tenants' group] and they look down on you...they don't think you've got a right to have a say just because you're on benefits and you're a single parent'

Female, 18-34, satisfied, disengaged

'There's a majority of older people, a young person's opinion doesn't count because they think they know everything'

Female, 18-34, satisfied, disengaged

Older tenants express a corresponding view about younger tenants' general interest in participation and community engagement:

'Older people take more pride in their surroundings than the young seem to nowadays'

Male, 55+, dissatisfied, disengaged

'I think that most people will assume that [the tenants' group] is elderly people who've got nothing better to do'

Female, 55+, satisfied, engaged

Such comments illustrate how tenants at the different ends of the age spectrum held strong views of the different generational groups' roles in tenant engagement. These perceptions have a strong bearing on their behaviour regarding participation in wider community groups.

Social class as a perceived barrier

Another key concern shaping tenants' views of who is involved in tenants' groups was the perception of the social class of involved tenants. This was linked closely to some tenants' sense that they would find a tenants' meeting '*intimidating*' or '*not for the likes of them*', as illustrated by the following comments:

'Perhaps people feel like they can't get involved because of their past...they're more likely to look at a man who owns a shop, or has got his own business and things like that, than to be talking to you'

Male, 55+, dissatisfied, disengaged

'There are the 'two-bob snobs' who go to the meetings...they have their own little clique. And they all talk amongst themselves and they'll do things amongst themselves'

Female, 35-54, satisfied, engaged

Such perceptions of who is involved in tenants' groups are notable because of their power across all demographic groups. Many tenants felt marginalised in the broader context of society - notably young single parents, isolated older people or the working class. These feelings are influential when they consider their potential for involvement in community organisations such as tenants' groups. As we will see, the result of these perceptions is that many of the most marginalized people living in social housing are deterred from becoming involved by the **powerful sense of difference** they feel between themselves and the people they perceive to be 'involved' in tenants' groups and their local community.

3.6 Conclusion

Disengaged and engaged tenants experience a range of practical, systemic, attitudinal and cultural barriers to involvement, all of which influence their actual behaviour relating to getting involved.

Many of these barriers, notably the practical and cultural ones, are functions of tenants' situation in life and in their community, and may be multidimensional – that is to say, tenants may experience a number of these factors at once.

Many of the tenants we spoke to have experienced (or currently experience) multiple barriers preventing them from becoming engaged in any form of civic activity, such as poverty and substance abuse. Such tenants are also far more likely to be sceptical about the value of involvement, in particular whether or not housing providers are likely to listen to their views or want to engage them in housing management. The result is that many tenants feel disempowered and are unlikely to participate in future opportunities.

4. Tenant typologies: who actually gets involved?

4. Tenant typologies: who actually gets involved?

4.1 Introduction

As we have seen in the previous chapters, tenants experience a range of barriers to involvement. For those tenants who feel they lack sufficient opportunity to be involved in their community, this range of barriers impacts on their behaviour, and views of involved tenants. This is equally true for engaged and disengaged tenants, as we shall see, although tenants who are indifferent to involvement provide a different case.

In this chapter we will first explore tenants' perceptions of involved tenants: are they all busybodies, and is that such a bad thing? Following this we discuss a typology of tenant involvement, developed from the evidence, observing the difference between what tenants say and what they are likely to do in reality.

4.2 Attitudes to members of tenants' groups

The previous chapter has shown us that tenants – particularly disengaged tenants – hold strong perceptions about the purpose of tenants groups and the opportunities available to them for involvement. In addition, tenants hold strong views about the kind of people who are involved with tenants groups and other involvement opportunities.

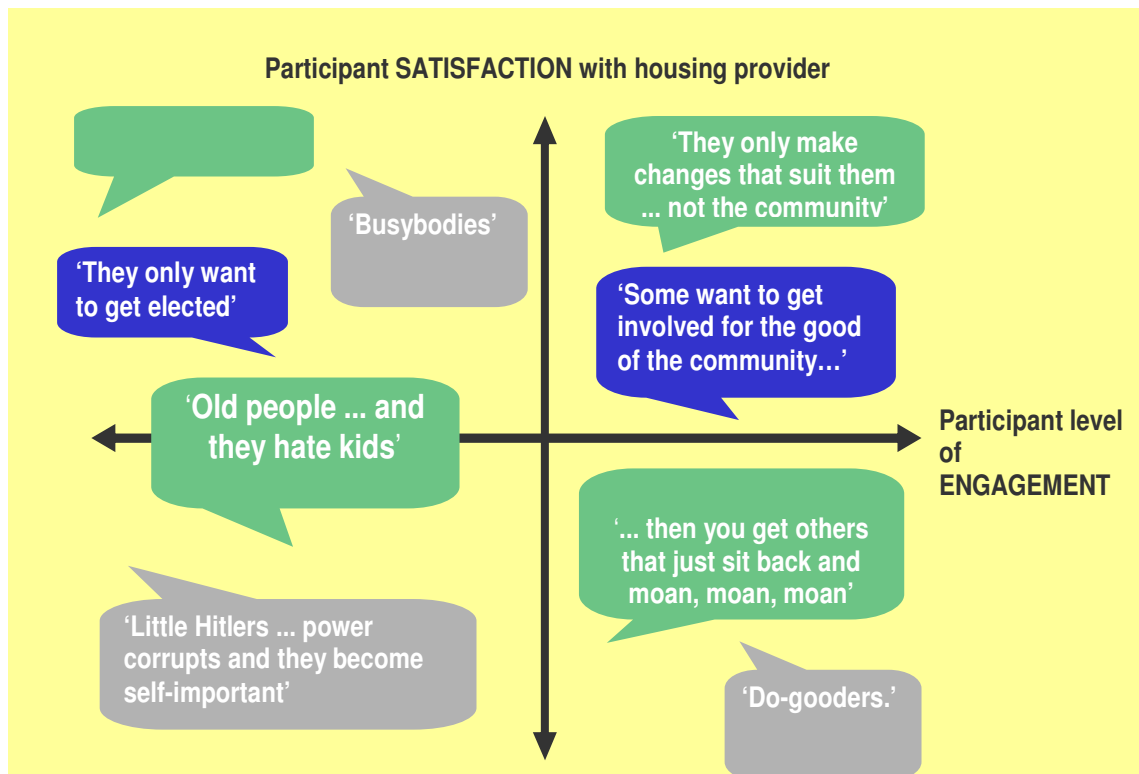
Some tenants seemed to make excuses for not getting involved in housing and other civic decision-making. But many of the tenants we spoke to unquestionably face multiple barriers to involvement that are certainly real and were therefore unable to base their opinions and perceptions on actual experiences of being involved, as discussed in the previous chapter. Nonetheless, these perceptions are important. This is because they often form the basis for how tenants say they would respond to an invitation to become involved, such as going to a tenants' association meeting.

In the previous chapter we have discussed some key drivers of tenants' perceptions: their preconceptions, their sense of themselves in their community and how this matches up with who takes part in tenants' groups and their experiences of engagements.

Satisfaction levels with their housing provider were also an important driver of whether or not tenants are likely to take up involvement opportunities or proactively seek them out. The following diagram maps some of tenants' main perceptions of people involved in tenants groups to these factors.

Chart 10: The range of tenants' perceptions of people involved in tenants' groups

'People in tenants groups are....'



Working clockwise from the top of the diagram, participants who were **satisfied and engaged** perceived a community focus for 'involved' tenants. Many of them felt that involved tenants might be 'busybodies', but that they had a positive impact on the community, although others were concerned at such people's level of self interest.

Those who were **less satisfied, but aware** of involvement were deeply cynical about the motives of 'involved' tenants. Often they knew people in tenants' groups personally, or had been to one or two meetings, and had become disillusioned through their experiences.

Those who were both **dissatisfied and lacking in knowledge** about engagement tended to complain of perceived corruption, but more than likely they did not know their

representatives at all, sometimes assuming that such people were keen on gaining clout with the housing provider.

Finally, those tenants who were **more satisfied but still lacking knowledge** about participation still expressed a range of negative perceptions: that people on tenants' associations were interfering busybodies, lonely or had nothing better to do.

These perceptions show that being a 'busybody' had both negative and positive connotations, depending on how satisfied tenants were with their housing, and how engaged they were in the community. These views were strongly-held, and, as the evidence above suggests, often negative, ultimately influencing tenants behaviour, despite what they said they would do if presented with opportunities for involvement.

4.3 A typology of tenant involvement behaviour

Do tenants' perceptions match who really takes part in tenants groups? And how do their perceptions match their behaviour? The evidence suggests that, broadly speaking, perceptions that involved tenants were older people did match the demographic profile assumed by tenants: they were generally older and may have had a long history of community involvement, although it is important to remember that our evidence is qualitative, and lacks the robustness of a statistical sample.

Where behaviour was concerned, as we have seen thus far, **awareness and understanding of engagement and participation** were crucial in influencing whether people did get involved. Our research suggested that it was only **good experiences of participation that** could bridge the gap created by tenants' perceptions (described in the previous section) and the personal and cultural barriers they experienced (see Chapter 3) to induce them to be involved. These good experiences of participation – whether accumulated in community groups, in the workplace, or in schools – were, crucially, *empowering*. As the following comment suggests, they allowed tenants to overcome multiple social barriers such as lack of confidence and lack of formal education, and feel it was possible to get involved.

'[People in tenants groups] are average people...But they've probably gained the confidence and experience to feel like they've got authority'

Female, 18-34, satisfied, disengaged

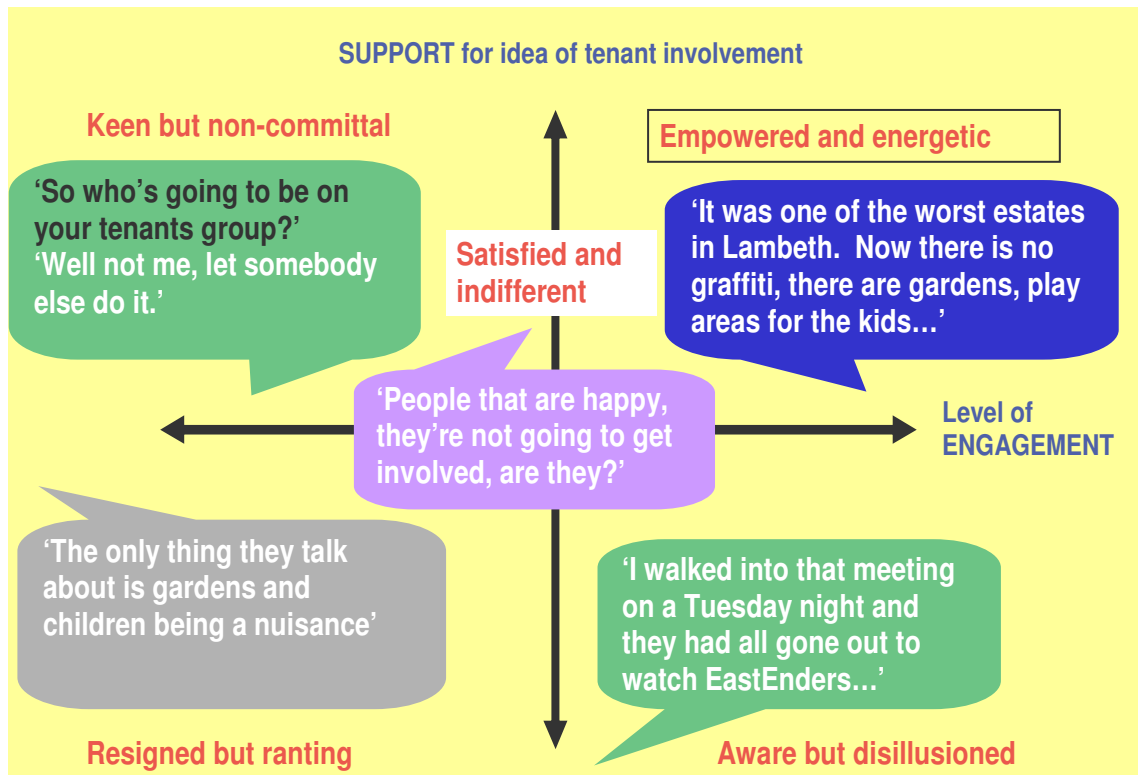
Furthermore, tenants' experiences and preconceptions of involvement did affect their actual behaviour. Many tenants acted upon their perceptions and responded to ideas about involvement along the lines of their preconceptions about tenants' groups, as outlined above.

Using this view of the importance of tenants' understanding and experience of participation has allowed us to develop a set of tenant involvement 'types' exemplifying the range of modes of actual behaviour regarding participation. These five types are as follows:

- **Empowered and energetic:** these are actively involved tenants, sometimes characterised as 'do-gooders' and 'busybodies' by some other tenants. It includes people on the boards of Tenant Management Organisations (TMOs) and also, typically, those in supported housing.
- **Aware but disillusioned:** these are tenants who may have once been involved, but are no longer active. Some had stopped taking part as their lives had changed, although many had been disillusioned by bad experiences of participation. They were unlikely to return to participation.
- **Resigned but ranting:** these are non-involved tenants who express no interest in getting involved but are dissatisfied with their housing provider. These tenants were generally apathetic, and made considerable excuses for their indifference.
- **Keen but non-committal:** these are non-involved tenants who support the idea of involvement, are keen on the perceived benefits and suggest that they would participate if given the opportunity. However, on probing, it became clear that they would not actually follow through with these claims.
- **Satisfied and indifferent:** these are non-involved tenants who express no interest in getting involved and are generally satisfied with their housing provider.

The following diagram maps out this typology of tenant involvement behaviour, showing the relationship between tenants' support for the principles of involvement against their level of engagement. The model does not include satisfaction with housing provider, or the desire to get involved, which is discussed in detail under each type.

Chart 11: A typology of tenant involvement behaviour



Of the five types, only the 'empowered and energetic' (top right hand corner) are actually involved in any sustained way. The following paragraphs explain the characteristics and demographics of each type in more detail.

1. Empowered and energetic

Tenants who were both satisfied with their housing providers and had a good awareness and understanding of participation were also often the most vocally 'satisfied' and strong advocates for engagement. These participants had a strong desire to get involved, and included tenants who were both satisfied and dissatisfied with their providers. This group included tenants living in supported housing regardless of age and tenants who were on the boards of TMOs.

The following comments from a tenant who was on the board of his ALMO is a powerful example of how a clear understanding of how the mechanisms of participation function, along with being given the power to make decisions, can mean that standards in housing are raised in area:

'A letter goes out to everybody on the estate and notices are put up everywhere, to be invited to the AGM where people are elected, where you can have your opinion...I think one difference that a housing committee can make is with repairs...we've brought in cheap insurance so people can insure their places...'

The participant continues to suggest that satisfaction levels had risen for all tenants in the area:

'Once you start making those little changes then people start taking pride in where they live. And once people start taking pride then you'll see a change'

Male, 35-55, satisfied, engaged

This is an exemplary case of how an understanding of engagement coupled with genuine empowerment can reap positive results.

Tenants in **supported housing**, both old and young, often put forward similar views about the importance of participation and their enthusiasm for it. The underlying reason for this was that **involvement was an integral part of their housing arrangements**. The following comment illustrates a typical scenario for younger tenants in supported housing:

'We have a house meeting where we put our opinions down. Doesn't mean they're going to act on it straight away, and sometimes we feel they don't listen to you, but sometimes they've really responded'

Male, 18-34, living in supported housing, paired depth

CASE STUDY 1: Empowered and energetic

Young people in supported housing: Selby, Yorkshire

Participants A and B are both residents in a special supported housing unit in Selby, Yorkshire for young people. They have very different temperaments: Participant A, a young man of 19, is very outgoing and gregarious, whereas Participant B, a young woman in her early 20s, is very quiet and shy, almost withdrawn.

They both like the idea of taking part in a tenants' group with residents in their wider housing association for a number of reasons. First of all, as Participant A tells us, they

are used to having house meetings and having their views heard. These meetings happen weekly, and they both feel that they get a lot of support from the management of their supported housing unit.

They also both understand that participation is a two-way process:

'Doesn't mean they're going to act on it straight away, but they do listen to you...it's a pass the parcel thing'

They also have a mature attitude about other people's interests:

'Everyone's opinion is valid, so when you say there's no right and wrong in anything, it's just how you look at it'

Participant A is very confident about taking part in tenant meetings, but Participant B is much less so. She would feel more confident if Participant A went along with her to a meeting, although she would like to go:

'If I'm poorly then I won't go. Or maybe I would go, but I'd stop in the corner or something. I'm just that shy person'

Participant A is very optimistic about participation, and is confident about participation, suggesting that he is *'always one to put opinions down leading to good debate for people'*. His views are underlined by a strong belief in the potential of collective action:

'I'm always happy to make time for something for the future which is good...if people have problems we all work together on one problem at a time, break it down and hopefully make things better'

He and Participant B are keen to get involved because they feel it might help lift the stigma in the community about people in their social housing unit, so that people *'don't label us, just because we're not as fortunate as they are'*.

Older tenants, even if they were not keen to be involved in housing management opportunities, often spoke of coffee mornings and similar meetings, which were subsidised by their housing provider – involvement which was not necessarily recognised as such by the tenants, but was involvement nonetheless.

They were generally people in the 55+ age groups, both men and women, although tenants in supported housing provided a notable exception to this general trend. Younger people in supported housing also were knowledgeable about engagement and bought into the idea that involvement mattered.

Tenants who fell into the category of 'empowered and energetic' were generally committed to participation and engagement, and had often had considerable experience in community groups which had allowed them to build up confidence in the understanding and negotiating mechanisms of engagement. They were well-versed in

the language of participation and their experiences had reinforced the idea that participation was an effective way of improving standards in housing.

CASE STUDY 2: Empowered and energetic

Portrait of a 'busybody': Taunton, Somerset

Participant C is a lady in her 60s, and a tenant in a council flat in Taunton, in what her housing officer tells us is one of the 'top ten most deprived areas in the UK'. The majority of tenants in the area, she tells us, are on benefits, unemployed, or long term sick. She has invited her housing officer to sit in on the early part of the meeting.

Her housing officer tells us she has asked Participant C to join the tenants' association because *'people are going to find her very easy to talk to and she's a great character, and we're trying to get new people on because people just don't want to do it'*. She goes on to explain: *'they don't want to get involved – well, they want to, but they don't want to put the time in to do it'*. Participant C has been chosen *'because people respect her and that's a good start'*.

The local authority is making efforts to help tenants overcome practical barriers to participation, such as paying for childcare costs and taxi fares so that older people don't have to walk. They are also offering training to tenants, which Participant C will be taking next month. The housing officer has also won the trust of Participant C, as well as her friend, Participant D, who is the same age and is far more cynical about the effects of involvement:

'When they first come on you think, oh, the same as any bloody else...but once you get to know them you can trust them...with our new housing officer if you say something needs doing normally it's done'

Both tenants are obviously impressed with the new housing officer's effectiveness, and her grit in representing their concerns to the local authority.

Participant D is a community activist in lots of different areas and is keen to get involved in the tenants' association:

'I go to a lot of meetings. I'm on the committee meeting at my doctor's surgery for patients, ten years now. I don't always like going, but I do because I want to know what other people have got to say'

She has built up a reputation in the community for being able to deal with tricky problems too:

'People know that I worked for the police as well as a volunteer, but I had no trouble in that respect. People will come to me because they know I'm a volunteer for the police, and so they speak to me with those kind of things'

However, her friend, Participant D, is much more cynical:

'You're never going to get people round here to get involved in things, don't matter how much you try, and I honestly think it's a waste of time'

She has been involved in the past, but has had huge bother with threats and reprisals for her efforts:

'People are frightened to get involved in anything. I used to go to meetings...and people were shouting out at me, oh, you're a scab, and in the end I stopped going'

They both feel strongly about how difficult it is to get young people involved, and feel that they are the only ones in their community interested in contributing.

'I don't think it's up to the council to get these people involved. I think it's up to people like us, and really it's only our generation, isn't it, that care? It is only most people from 50 onwards care what's going on, because they're at the stage where they want to be able to walk out without being frightened'

2. Aware but disillusioned

Women above the age of 35, as well as many men in the 55+ age range, predominated in this group of tenants who knew a considerable amount about engagement but had stopped going to meetings and had become cynical about the mechanisms and the people who attended meetings. This group had once had the desire to get involved, but this had now been eroded. They consisted people who were both happy and dissatisfied with their housing providers.

This type of tenant didn't see the point of bothering with engagement because bad involvement experiences had put them off. These bad involvement experiences included the following situations, illustrated with comments below:

- Housing providers not contributing to meetings or taking their relationships with tenants seriously:

'I've attended a few times. It's a waste of time going because the housing never turns up'

Female, 35-54, satisfied, involved

- Housing providers appearing indifferent to tenants' suggestions and not conceding any power:

'It's no good having a voice if it's not listened to'

Male, 55+, dissatisfied, engaged

- Disliking other involved tenants and feeling that they abuse their power:

'Sometimes if you get members on a committee it goes to their heads'

Male, 55+, satisfied, disengaged

- Noticing the lack of interest in engagement among their own peer group

'I think the enthusiasm would build the momentum, but Jennifer wouldn't go on a Tuesday and Frank would let you down on a Friday night...it deteriorates very rapidly'

Female, 35-54, satisfied, engaged

This group was usually put off engagement permanently as their experiences had made them cynical. However, they were well-informed about involvement partly as a result of having been engaged themselves, and partly as a result of socializing with people who were more likely to be 'empowered and energetic' types.

3. Resigned but ranting

This group included most young people, notably those who did *not* live in supported housing. Tenants in this group were highly dissatisfied with their housing provision but they saw no point in being involved because they did not feel that it was the kind of activity that they and their peers would take part in, and also that their concerns would not be taken seriously (see Chapter 3). They had minimal desire to be involved in a tenants' group.

Their strong attitudes were clearly reflected in their behaviour, and many admitted that they were not remotely interested in taking part, despite their dissatisfaction. The following comment was typical:

'Even if you went to a tenants association...why would they want to listen to you?'

Female, 18-34, satisfied, disengaged

This group was very badly informed about engagement, and had little experience of being involved in community groups of any kind, or in participation through school or work. Finally, their lack of knowledge made it difficult for them to grasp the possibilities

of engagement, although many of this group expressed great frustration that their 'voices were not heard' and their opinions were not solicited:

'When their leaflet comes through your door it's not about asking your opinion...It's about telling you what to do'

Female, 18-34, dissatisfied, disengaged

4. Keen but non-committal

This group were very enthusiastic about the idea of being involved, but there was a considerable gap between their perceptions of what involvement meant and their actual experiences. They lacked understanding of the attendant responsibilities, and also confidence in their ability to put their ideas across. Without the basis of experience, many tenants in this group tended to idealise their own – and others' – contributions in an involvement context. In group discussions, other participants sometimes had to 'burst their bubble', as the following comment illustrates:

'If you had this meeting and everybody went there's going to be people who probably wouldn't come out of their house who would think, oh, I'm going to go along for that'

Female, 35-54, satisfied, involved

Yet, on probing, it became evident that there was a considerable difference between how these tenants *said* they would act and what they were, in fact, more likely to do in real life. When challenged – sometimes by their peers – tenants in this group admitted that they would not in fact make the time for a tenants group. Involvement was not an essential need, rather a means to improve conditions they felt strongly about.

This group was particularly characterised by wanting the benefits but not the responsibilities of involvement, and also by a lack of confidence, as discussed on Chapter 3.3. They were excited about the possibilities of having a forum for their opinions, but it was evidently doubtful whether they would follow their claims through. 'Keen but non-committals' were not well informed about engagement and had minimal experiences of participation in other spheres of their life. In practice, they were uncomfortable about taking on the responsibility of representing others, and

contributing regularly, and were more committed to the principle of involvement, which they took to mean having an opportunity to 'have their say'.

People in this group were found across all demographics, but particularly in the 35-55 age group.

CASE STUDY 3: Keen but non-committal

Young mothers in local authority housing: Selby, Yorkshire

Participants E and F are young single mothers who are residents in local authority housing in Selby, Yorkshire. Participant E is satisfied with her housing, but Participant F feels she has had a bruising experience:

'My house was getting terrorised and the council won't move me. I've got three kids in a two bedroomed house. The council just won't do anything. Repairs, with the council, I've got to wait. Well, I've been waiting a year and a half for my door to be done. It's just ridiculous'

They both like the idea of a tenants' association because they are keen that standards should improve. But because they have had little experience of participation in their social or community life, they have no idea how it would work, or how to go about things:

'Nobody's ever done anything like that. I wouldn't know where to start'

They have strong view about what they might like to achieve through a tenants' group, but aren't necessarily motivated by getting the best for their community. They feel that others who are involved in Neighbourhood Watch groups and tenants' associations are just the same:

'Yeah, I just like to be nosy...and they're all busybodies. Some of them do try and help, but then, the others, just like to know your business'

They see the main role of tenant involvement as battling with the local authority to improve standards:

'There's no law saying that you can't change things. It's just pushing the council'

However, they are somewhat unrealistic about the real responsibilities of the role, and on probing it becomes clear that their commitment to involvement would not be lasting. They feel that to ensure the continued commitment of others in their community, the council will have to help changes to happen. They feel that once people saw improvements happening, they would be more likely to get involved:

'There's a lot of people who'd see, if they saw changes, then they'd stay in, because then obviously, you're achieving something, aren't you? There's no point in carrying it on, is there, if you're just going to hit a brick wall.'

5. Satisfied and indifferent

This group cuts across all demographic groups, though includes many of the oldest and youngest participants who – although often having some minor cause for complaint – admitted that they were happy enough with their situation, and were not interested in participating in any way.

However, it is important to remember that tenants have different levels of tolerance and that satisfaction has a different meaning for different age groups. This group therefore also includes tenants whom one participant called:

‘People that want to keep themselves to themselves, not wanting other people to know their business’

Female, 18-34, satisfied, disengaged

Also, many older tenants explained how they or their parents would prefer to claim they were satisfied so as *‘not to make a fuss’*.

In general these participants knew very little about engagement and participation, although this was not exclusively the case, as the following case study illustrates.

Case study 4: Satisfied but indifferent

Older people in supported housing: Taunton, Somerset

Participants G and H are women in their 60s, residents in supported housing for older people in Taunton.

They are aware of their tenants’ association, and have even taken part in it in the past. However, they have both decided that it’s not for them: they have better things to do as the following comment illustrate:

‘It’s long and it’s boring and we’ve just got plenty of other things to do! A lot of things have nothing to do with us’

However, they both admit that they are very content with their housing, and furthermore, they *are* involved in other community activities:

‘We have coffee mornings and other little things going on in there...it keeps our community together because we do keep an eye on people’

Both participants are on the committee for these coffee mornings and games evenings, which they enjoy.

They also have a representative on the tenants' association with whom they are very pleased:

'She's a bit bolshy, but she knows what she's doing...if there's anything important we ought to know, she'll let us know, she'll come in to the coffee morning and let us know'

For these reasons they don't feel any further need to get involved in their community, and they certainly feel as if they have.

4.4 Conclusion

The wide range of tenants' attitudes to the minority of tenants who do get involved shows us that 'busybodies' can be perceived both positively and negatively depending on a tenant's level of satisfaction and how they perceive engagement.

Furthermore, a typology of tenant behaviour helps us to understand how involved tenants are likely to be, and illustrates that in actuality, only a small number of tenants included in this research actually follow through their enthusiasm for the principles of involvement.

It also shows us that satisfaction plays an important part, and that many of those who are not keen to be involved do not feel they lack opportunities, and are content with their housing. Finally, it further helps explain why some tenants get involved and others do not, bringing together and explaining the multiple barriers to involvement, especially attitudinal barriers, that tenants may experience.

5. Mechanisms of involvement

5. Mechanisms of involvement

5.1 Introduction

The previous chapter has shown us that tenants' experiences and perceptions, combined with their level of satisfaction and level of knowledge, contribute to their behaviour regarding involvement. This chapter will explore the role the available mechanisms of involvement have to play.

As discussed in Chapter 2, many 'disengaged' participants had little experience of how they could get involved regarding their housing situation and how the mechanisms of participation available to them worked. Nonetheless, tenants had strong views on the lack of information available to them, the relationship of their tenants' group with the housing provider, and the role of their representatives. In this chapter, we will discuss these aspects in more detail.

5.2 Responses to involvement mechanisms

Communication of involvement opportunities

Tenants have very strong views that the opportunities for participation were not communicated at many levels. Many tenants, especially from the younger age groups, could not tell us what the tenants' groups were for, and across all demographics, their understanding of the objectives of tenants groups was very shaky.

Furthermore, tenants are unhappy with the quality of information they receive, feeling that they are not given basic details of where and when meetings are:

'I don't think the council does enough to come to the tenants. It would make all the difference if they had a meeting and told us when it was'

Female, 35-54, satisfied, disengaged

Across all demographics, both engaged and disengaged tenants suggested that good communication about involvement was the most important contribution providers could make.

Representation by their peer group

We have seen that some 'keen but non-committal' tenants are keen to reap the benefits of involvement, but are often unwilling to take on the responsibilities. This is sometimes due to not being bothered – the perception that *'it's too much hassle'* – and sometimes due to fear and a sense of intimidation, as well as other factors discussed in Chapter 3.

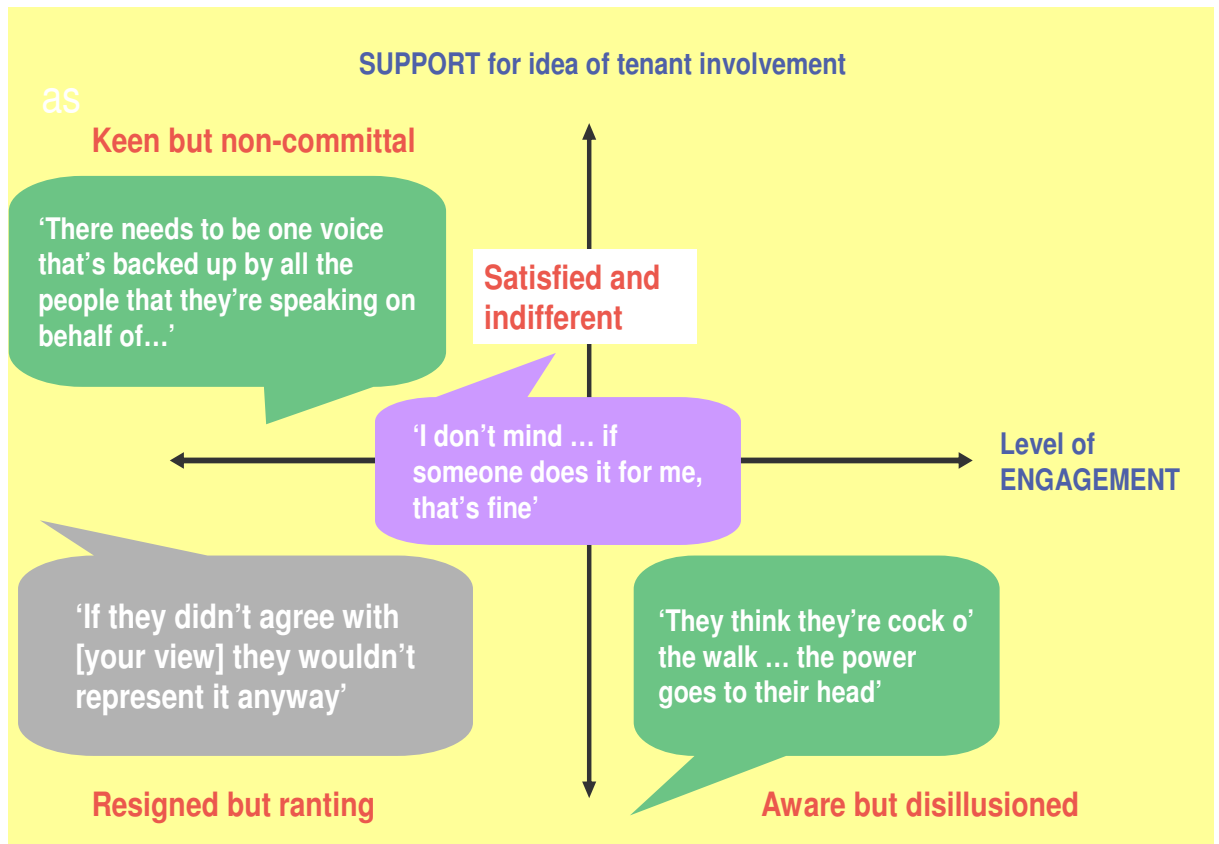
A tenants' representative therefore presented itself as a strong solution for many of the tenants we spoke to, both 'engaged' and 'disengaged', despite the feelings expressed by many that nosiness or corruption might be a problem (see Chapter 4.1). The following comment illustrates that disengaged participants related to the idea of a peer representative in simple terms of democracy.

'There should be some sort of chairman or something out there that's voted in once a year, something like that, if he's any good, obviously he'll be voted back in again'

Male, 55+, dissatisfied, engaged

When asked if they would be happy to have someone speak on their behalf tenants expressed a range of views, as the following chart illustrates:

Chart 12: What non-involved tenant types think about having a peer representative speaking on their behalf



Those tenants that fell into the 'satisfied and indifferent' category were generally happy enough for someone to represent them.

Those that were 'aware but disillusioned' were relatively cynical about representatives, and felt that they might abuse their power.

Tenants who were 'resigned but ranting' felt that only they could adequately represent their own views – but that did not necessarily mean they would participate.

Finally, the many who were 'keen but non-committal' were enthusiastic about being represented as they were keen to get the benefits of tenant representation, without make personal efforts. They preferred this to taking part themselves.

The relationship with the housing provider

Dissatisfied tenants feel strongly about what they perceive to be the powerlessness of tenants' groups:

'The tenants' association's got to have a little bit of power, then things are going to work... they don't want to be shouting the same things and getting knocked back all the time, what's the point in joining? ...They don't want to be hitting a brick wall'

Male, 55+, dissatisfied, disengaged

Many tenants spoke of the importance of ensuring that tenants' groups are actually empowered and have the chance to implement changes. However, most tenants, especially those who are disengaged, have great difficulty explaining how this might be achieved.

Those tenants who had had experience of participation in other spheres – notably in their professional lives, suggested measures such as financial transparency, so that tenants might know how providers were spending money. Tenants who are involved with TMOs are highly articulate on these points, and suggested measures such as tenant control of budgets and involvement in decisions of how those budgets were spent.

5.3 Conclusion

If tenants have a good relationship with their provider, they feel empowered and much more positively involved. This is reflected in both the discussion groups and some of the paired interviewing we conducted. Satisfaction with housing providers is a very strong influence on positive perceptions of involvement, and this is equally true where dissatisfaction is felt.