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Hearing resident voices in social housing

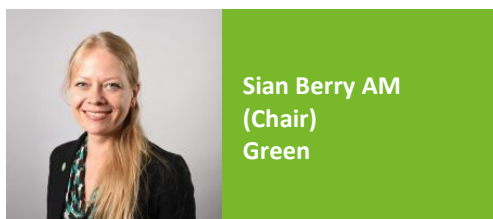


Housing Committee
November 2018

Holding the Mayor to
account and
investigating issues
that matter to
Londoners

LONDONASSEMBLY

Housing Committee Members



The Housing Committee scrutinises the Mayor's role and record in delivering the private, social and affordable homes London needs.

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Sian Berry AM

Chair of the Housing Committee



Following the Grenfell Tower fire, many residents of the tower block and surrounding estate spoke out to say that they had tried to raise concerns about safety issues but that their voices had not been listened to or concerns adequately addressed.

As part of the Assembly's work on issues coming out of the disaster, we launched an inquiry into how social housing residents are engaged in the management of their homes and estates.

We surveyed London boroughs and the g15 group of the largest housing associations on the different ways they get residents involved in decision making. We also held a public meeting in July with representatives from three London boroughs, two g15 housing associations, and the Deputy Mayor for Housing and Residential Development.

We also made sure to listen to the voices of social housing residents themselves on how they are engaged in the management of their homes. We held an 'open mic' session facilitated by London Tenants Federation groups, where social housing residents were able to voice their opinions and concerns. Alongside this we received written submissions from London-based individuals and tenants' and resident's groups.

I would like to warmly thank all those who contributed to this investigation.

This report summarises the findings from this research. It makes recommendations to the Mayor on how he can contribute to a more open and responsive culture of engagement between social housing landlords and their residents.

The report recognises that social housing landlords bring management expertise and financial resources; however it also highlights that residents bring resources of a different kind – reflections of a lived experience, energy and collective spirit. Together, both share the ambition of creating safe, comfortable homes where people and communities will thrive. I hope that this report will contribute to that goal.

Summary

Roughly one in four homes in London are classified as providing social housing. Over the past five years the amount of social housing available in London has changed little, despite rising demand. There are expectations that the number of social homes in London is very likely to increase with the Mayor's new affordable homes programmes and recent Government announcements such as the lifting of the Local Authorities borrowing cap and the Social Housing Green Paper.

The fire at Grenfell Tower in June 2017 led many commentators and residents to question whether social housing residents are adequately involved in decisions which affect their homes. In the aftermath of the fire the Assembly's Housing Committee launched an inquiry into how London's social housing residents are engaged in the management of their homes and estates.

During the investigation social housing landlords told us that resident engagement is crucial in shaping services and that residents should be involved as far as it is possible in everything that affects their lives.

We found that social landlords may choose a mix of approaches to engage residents with housing management, and some are developing new ways of engaging residents, often using digital tools. Resident engagement appears to work better when addressing specific topics over a limited timescale.

But, in our many discussions, we heard concerns that residents feel increasingly disconnected from their landlords and find engagement with them frustrating and often difficult. Residents spoke of their unhappiness with the large number of parties involved in the management of their social housing estates, which complicates oversight of housing services and leads to a lack of transparency and accountability, and hence a loss of trust.

Indeed, while the social landlord is ultimately responsible for managing homes to a high standard for residents, often many parties are involved in the delivery of housing management services. Both social landlords and arm's length management organisations manage their homes through a mixture of in-house and outsourced service delivery. Council tenants and leaseholders can take on the responsibility for some housing management functions by setting up a tenant management organisation (TMO) and while TMOs are popular with residents and perform well there is a limited number of them in London.

We heard from residents that independent tenant voices and democratic

organisations are a positive way for residents to engage with landlords. Tenant and resident associations (TRAs) have long been used for residents to engage with social housing landlords. TRAs can build a sense of community and provide an effective collective voice.

Our report sets out what meaningful engagement between landlords and residents should look like and the importance of the role of housing officers and digital engagement in achieving it. We compiled seven good principles for resident engagement based on what we heard from residents.

Personal interaction with managers, visible responsiveness of the management team and the ability for residents to have a real say over future decisions on housing services are all key to a successful model. Resident engagement bodies also need to engage in a timely fashion before decisions are made and to engage widely with a diverse sector of the resident body.

Housing officers have a key role to play as the first port of call in housing management and resident engagement. Residents reported that they have less and less contact with housing officers. In order to create opportunities for meaningful engagement we would like to see a reaffirmation of the value of the role of the housing officer.

Alongside an investment in housing officers, digital engagement strategies can help to ensure high levels of engagement. Digital tools can be used to reach out to residents who might not feel comfortable attending a formal TRA meeting. Digital engagement can also provide rapid feedback on day-to-day maintenance issues that, if left unattended, would create tension.

Although the Mayor is not a social housing landlord, he has a strategic role to play in supporting social housing through planning decisions, and funding local authorities and housing associations in London to build new homes. Our report makes recommendations to the Mayor to help change the culture of engagement between residents and landlords within the sector. This includes supporting the Social Housing Green Paper's proposal to increase transparency around the performance of landlords through key performance indicators on resident engagement and other areas.

We also want the Mayor to appoint a Social Housing Commissioner for London, someone who can promote the views of social housing residents and encourage social housing landlords to promote meaningful ways of involving residents in decision making. The commissioner should sit on the Homes for Londoners board to drive forward the accountability and transparency agenda and ensure that new homes are meeting the diverse needs of social housing residents. Finally, we would like the Mayor to ensure that landlords that have contracts with the GLA through the Affordable Homes Programme put in place policies that are compliant with Public Sector Duty and Freedom of Information principles.

Recommendations

Influencing the Green Paper

Recommendation 1

The Housing Committee supports the Government's call for KPIs to assess the performance of social landlords. The key performance indicators on resident engagement should be changed to help bring about engagement that is meaningful for tenants and managers and follow the good principles identified in this report.

A social housing commissioner for London

Recommendation 2

The Mayor should appoint a London social housing commissioner tasked with encouraging social housing landlords to promote participatory and meaningful ways of involving residents in decision making. The London social housing commissioner should be a champion of social housing residents' interests and encourage good practice in resident engagement across the sector.

Recommendation 3

The London social housing commissioner should sit on the Homes for Londoners board to drive forward the accountability and transparency agenda in the sector.

Greater transparency in the sector

Recommendation 4¹

The Mayor should ensure that landlords who have contracts with the GLA for developing new affordable homes improve transparency and management, as conditions introduced as part of future funding programmes. These should include compliance with Public Sector Equality Duty and Freedom of Information principles and, for example, simplifying management structures.

¹ The UKIP group does not agree that landlords should have to be compliant with PSED principles in future funding arrangements.

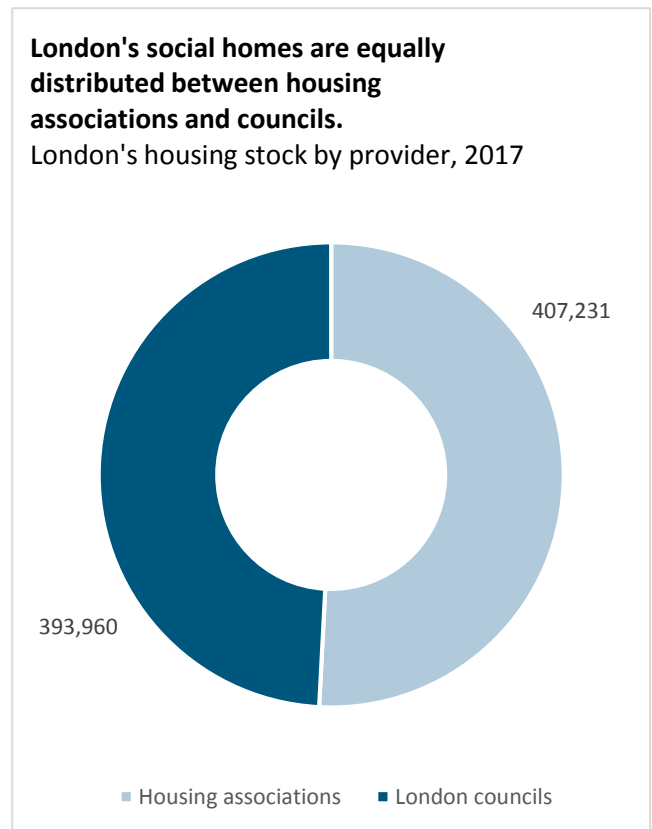
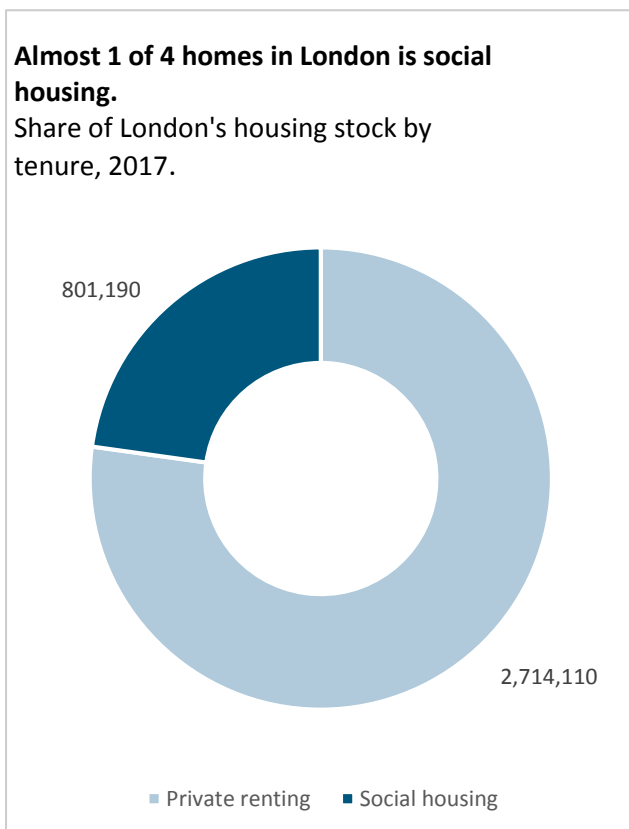
1. London's social housing and its residents

Key findings

- Almost 1 in 4 homes in London is social housing.
- For the past two decades, housing associations have provided most of London's new affordable and social homes.
- Housing associations have fewer statutory obligations in terms of transparency and accountability.
- Housing association tenants do not have a legal right to manage.

London's social housing and its residents

- 1.1 Many Londoners live in social housing. In 2017, London's social housing stock was 801,190 homes, almost 23 per cent of London's total housing. London's social housing is equally distributed between housing associations (407,230 homes) and London councils (393,960 homes).¹
- 1.2 In the five years to 2017, the amount of social housing in London remained fairly constant, with around 3,000 additional units built. In comparison, over the same period, London's private housing stock increased by 5 per cent overall, with 140,000 additional units built.



- 1.3 Since the late 1980s, government policy has encouraged the use of stock transfer programmes from local authorities to housing associations. Indeed, in 2017 four London boroughs transferred all or a very large part of their social housing stock to housing associations. Housing associations have been largely responsible for building new subsidised homes in London. Between 1992 and 2017, councils in England built an average of 821 new homes per year. During the same period, housing associations built an average of 22,650 homes per year.²
- 1.4 While housing associations are currently the main providers of social and affordable homes to Londoners and receive public funding, they have fewer statutory obligations than councils. Importantly, housing associations are not subject to the Freedom of Information (FOI) Act. Nor do they have to abide by

the Public Sector Equality Duty (PSED), which requires councils to consider how their policies and service delivery impact on individuals who are protected under the Equality Act.³ Furthermore, while a tenant management organisation (TMO) can operate in some ways with housing associations, only council leaseholders and tenants have the right to acquire the landlord's management functions through a TMO.⁴

Section 1 of the Public Sector Equality Duty on socio-economic inequalities

Section 1 of the Public Sector Equality Duty is not yet in force in England or Wales, but the Scottish Government brought it into force in April 2018.

Section 1 requires councils to consider how strategic decisions on how to exercise their functions affect, or could affect, those experiencing socio-economic disadvantage and, thereupon, exercise them in a way that reduces inequalities of outcome which result from socio-economic disadvantage.

At our informal meeting, we heard from residents and legal campaigners, including from the London Tenants Federation and Race on the Agenda, that the enforcement of the socio-economic duty would provide a stronger voice for social housing tenants, whose voices are not heard due to barriers arising from economic disadvantage and negative stereotyping of social housing residents.

Just Fair's report, published in June 2018, *Tackling socio-economic inequalities locally - Good practices in the implementation of the socio-economic duty by local authorities in England* reaches the same conclusion: "Requiring systematic consultation with those identified as socio-economically disadvantaged, in the same way as those communities defined by existing protected characteristics, translates into active engagement with residents and communities in the decision-making process."

2. Housing management: who does what?

Key findings

- While the social landlord is ultimately responsible for providing good housing management standards, many parties can be involved in the delivery of housing management services.
- Social landlords manage their homes through a mixture of in-house and outsourced service delivery.
- Six London boroughs have delegated the management of their social housing stock to arm's length management organisations.
- Tenant and management organisations are by and large successful in providing satisfying services to residents.

Housing management: who does what?

- 2.1 Housing management is the provision of day-to-day services to residents such as collecting rents, providing repairs, maintenance and cleaning, responding to complaints, tackling anti-social behaviour, customer service and managing major works programmes. While the social landlord is ultimately responsible for managing homes to a high standard for residents,⁵ several parties are involved in the delivery of housing management services.
- 2.2 Our survey indicates that six London boroughs have delegated the management of their social housing stock to arm's length management organisations (ALMOs). This amounts to a total of 69,420 homes in London, which is 18 per cent of London's council owned stock.
- 2.3 Social landlords and ALMOs manage their homes through a mixture of in-house and outsourced service delivery. Some housing functions are outsourced to private contractors; others are devolved to resident-organised groups under the statutory right to manage.
- 2.4 Most social landlords contract out the management of at least some functions to private companies. For example, Pinnacle PSG, a private company providing housing management and facilities management services, has been awarded a 10-year housing management contract by Hammersmith and Fulham council. Services taken over by Pinnacle PSG there include tenancy management, customer services, tackling anti-social behaviour, management of void properties, resident engagement and estate cleaning.
- 2.5 Housing associations do not tend to outsource housing management services as they see those services as part of their core activities.⁶ When they do, 'repairs and maintenance' is the service most often outsourced.
- 2.6 Council tenants and leaseholders can take on the responsibility for some housing management functions by setting up a tenant management organisation (TMO). A TMO involves a transfer of responsibility for certain landlord functions to a resident-organised group. The range of responsibilities taken over by TMOs varies from undertaking cleaning functions to handling major repairs. In most cases, a TMO will deliver services to residents for one housing estate or block and manage on average 200 homes.
- 2.7 TMOs are popular with residents and perform well. TMOs are subject to continuation ballots every five years, making them regularly accountable to residents. Southwark council reported that turnout is high for continuation ballots and that, by and large, TMOs receive support for continuation.⁷ Similarly, the London Tenants Federation reports that TMOs' management performance matches that of the best 25 per cent of councils in England.

Case study – JMB Leathermarket

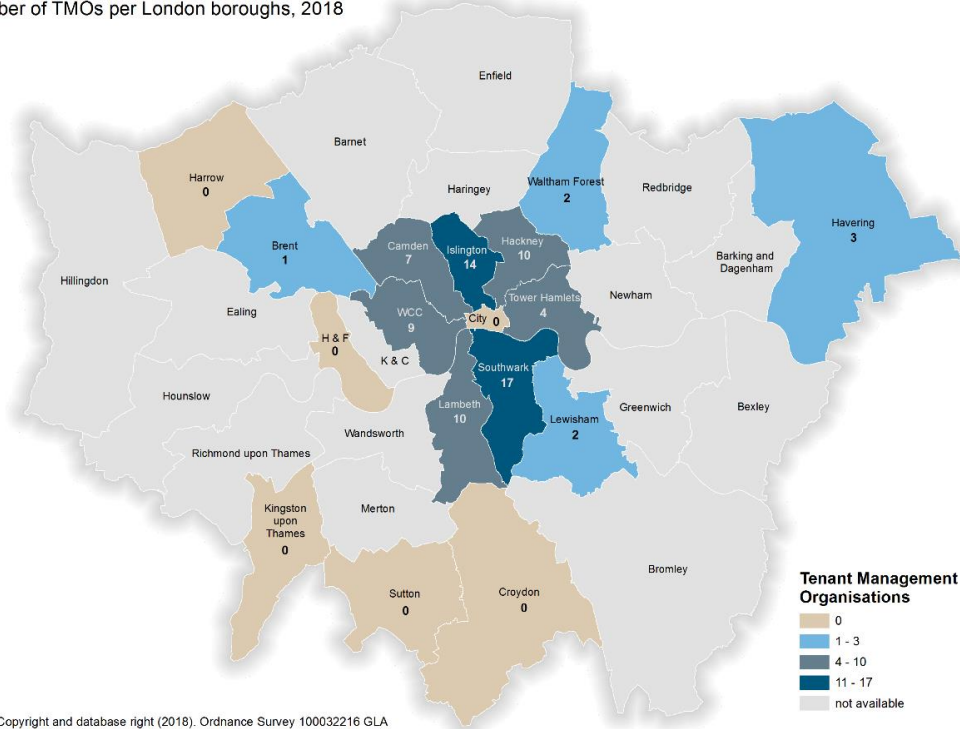
An example of a long term, successful TMO in Southwark is **JMB Leathermarket**. The functions taken over by this TMO include rent collection, repairs and maintenance, customer services, improvement works, cleaning, bulk rubbish collection and gardening. JMB Leathermarket is an unusually large TMO as it manages over 1,500 homes across two areas, Borough and Bermondsey. In 2013, JMB became the first self-financed TMO in the country: it retains all rent and service charges and decides on future improvements and changes. This was a vote of confidence from both residents and Southwark council.

JMB is a resident-run organisation. Five tenants and resident associations (TRAs) represent JMB residents. Each TRA elects two residents to become JMB directors, who then form the JMB Board of Directors. The directors take key decisions on behalf of residents, question what JMB is doing, agree on service improvements, ensure that JMB is financially stable and that it meets its legal obligations.

During a committee meeting in February, we heard from JMB that it is key to communicate regularly with tenants through surveys, social media and public meetings. The trust that has developed over time between the TMO and residents allows the organisation to discuss difficult and complex issues with tenants in a positive way, including fire safety, major works programmes and new housing developments.

- 2.8 Despite their apparent successful performance and popularity, the number of TMOs is limited in London and varies greatly across London. Southwark and Islington councils have the highest numbers of TMOs in London: 17 and 14 respectively. Between them, TMOs manage a total of 4,500 homes in Southwark and 2,178 homes in Islington.

There is a limited number of TMOs in London and the numbers vary greatly between boroughs
 Number of TMOs per London boroughs, 2018



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Source: Desktop research and written submissions to the London Assembly Housing Committee

3. Engaging residents in social housing management

Key findings

- Many residents do not feel listened to by their landlords.
- The more parties involved in providing housing services, the more it complicates the oversight of housing services and the ways in which residents are engaged.
- Social housing landlords use a mix of approaches to engage residents in service shaping and delivery. The trend is to widen engagement beyond the traditional ways and reach out to less engaged residents and, in particular, under-represented groups (such as young people) using new methods such as digital engagement.
- While social landlords say that the popularity of TRA among residents is falling, many residents still feel strongly that TRAs are a positive way for residents to engage with landlords.

Engaging residents in social housing management

3.1 The Grenfell Tower fire brought into sharp focus the lack of effective mechanisms for social housing residents to have their concerns addressed and to hold their landlords accountable for property standards and management.

3.2 In our open mic session⁸ and through our requests for views⁹, we heard that residents felt increasingly disconnected from their landlords and found engagement with them frustrating and problematic:

“lots of residents feel that the process of consultation and resident engagement exercises from the council are box ticking exercises and ‘pay lip service’ to listening to tenants.”

“with some occasional exceptions, over the last 20-30 years engagement has been poor to average; sometimes with complete failures to consult or to hear view of residents on our estate.”

“Concerns raised by residents are seen as an attack on the landlord rather than a tool to assist with long term resolution.”

3.3 In particular, residents from across London spoke of their unhappiness with the large number of parties involved in the management of their social housing estates, which complicates oversight of housing services and leads to a lack of transparency and accountability and hence a loss of trust.

3.4 A submission from a TRA stated that:

“the ALMO employs contractors and passes risk and blame to them. These contractors then employ sub-contractors who bear some risk and blame, and the sub-contractors use suppliers, to whom further responsibility for risk and blame are passed through their contracts. This structure leads to lack of transparency on responsibility and impedes the learning process to improve service delivery and financial accountability for residents and the landlord.” (resident submission)

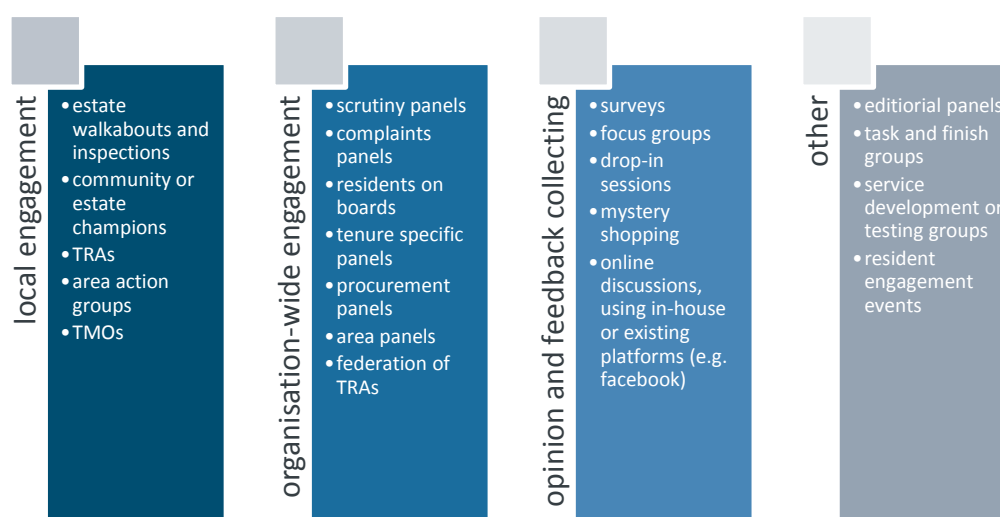
3.5 Residents also told us that they felt uneasy at being expected to deal directly with contractors. We heard:

“Increasingly residents are expected to communicate directly with contractors, rather than through the landlord. They can be faced with prevarication and rudeness which is frustrating and off-putting, as it is probably meant to be. Seeking solutions can mean repeated emails, letters, phone calls eventually going up to the chief executive officer. Even the housing officers appear to have little power.” (resident submission)

“Our members feel that their TRAs are left to deal with poor contractors (doing this on behalf of their landlord). London Tenants Federation produced a document called ‘problems with landlord contractors’ for its member groups as such a large number of complaints have been reported”. (resident submission)

Social landlords use a mix of approaches to engage residents

- 3.6 In the submissions received from London Councils and the g15 group of housing associations, we found that social landlords choose a mix of approaches to engage residents with housing management issues. Engagement varies in form (formal and informal engagement), in scope (from getting feedback to engaging in decision-making) and scale (from localised engagement to organisation-wide).



Common ways used across the sector to engage residents, written submissions from housing providers to the London Assembly Housing Committee, 2018

- 3.7 Social housing landlords are also developing new ways of engaging residents, often using digital tools.¹⁰ According to social landlords, these new approaches have been aimed at engaging a wider audience, including isolated or hard-to-reach residents. For example:

- Clarion housing association’s National Young Ambassadors (16-25-year olds) focus on improving services for young people with young people’s help.
- Waltham Forest Council has a dedicated disability forum to secure feedback on existing services and future initiatives.
- Camden Council has a Citizen’s Assembly, a demographically representative group of 70 residents (tenants and leaseholders and other citizens) to help the council make decisions with residents. While

the forum is not about housing alone, it was designed for residents to be engaged with decision making in Camden, identifying priority challenges and co-producing solutions.

- Last year, 3,000 residents took part in the Southwark Conversation run by Southwark Council. They used a whole range of methods from street stores to digital engagement, including what they call “Talkaoke”, which consists of a round table with a host sitting in the middle on a swivel chair. Participants sit around the outside and are passed the microphone whenever they want to talk, coming and going as they please. This format was used to ask what residents think about the changes in the borough, and what people would like to see in the future. Housing and estate needs were raised as a top concern for Southwark residents.
- Anchor housing association has a LGBT group. It was established 10 years ago and is supported and funded by the involvement team.

3.8 Several social landlords reported that resident engagement worked better when addressing specific topics over a limited timescale. As such, scrutiny panels and task and finish groups are becoming an increasingly popular way for social landlords to work with residents. We heard:¹¹

“The Scrutiny panel has been most effective mechanism for resident involvement... although it requires a big commitment from panel members their resulting report of findings and recommendations always lead to an agreed action plan to improve services.” (London Borough of Croydon)

“We tend to find engagement works better when it is focused on a specific issue and is more a task and finish type approach. We have had a good engagement, for example, by setting up joint working groups looking at the refurbishment of a community centre, the development of a new playground facility and the planning of community festival.” (City of London)

“Increasingly we are moving to a more flexible model of involvement that opens up opportunities for residents from any of our established involvement mechanisms to work with us on a thematic basis. For example, feedback from residents highlighted a need to improve our communal repairs service and in consequence a joint resident, Tower Hamlets Homes Board and staff task and finish has been set up to identify issues and put in place an improvement plan.” (London Borough of Tower Hamlets)

3.9 Nevertheless we heard in our evidence from residents that, while tenant scrutiny panels and other mechanisms have a role to play in improving service

delivery, they should not replace independent tenant voices and democratic organisations that provide a collective voice. Indeed, the London Tenants Federation challenged the view that these models of engagement were popular, arguing that they “engage fewer tenants; elected tenant representatives become more disengaged, tenants are less informed about housing policy (from the local to national level) and there is a much greater feeling of disempowerment.”¹²

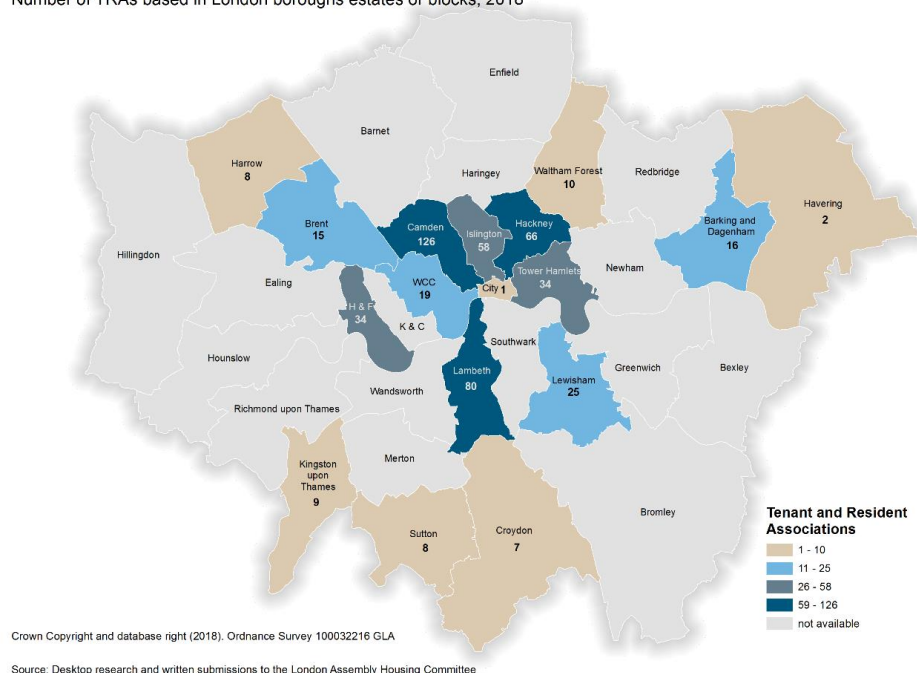
Resident-led engagement in social housing management – the role of TRAs

- 3.10 A long-standing way for residents to be engaged with social housing landlords is through a tenant and resident associations. TRAs set up by and for residents to represent residents when interacting with the landlord’s housing department. A TRA is made up of residents living on an estate, block or street(s) who have formed TRA to improve the area in which they live. TRAs give residents a voice in how their area is managed by working with social landlords’ housing services. They find solutions to local problems and local service delivery.
- 3.11 Most, if not all, London boroughs have TRAs. An average TRA can have a reach of anything from 474 homes (City of Westminster) to just 30 (London Borough of Havering). The London Tenants Federation believes that on average a TRA represents around 200 homes.
- 3.12 We heard from both residents and landlords that TRAs can create a sense of community and enable an effective collective voice:

“Our TRAs do some fantastic things. They are great at helping communities bind together. Many of them have halls and loads of activities go on there and they organise a whole host of things that it is really sensible to let residents get on with and do.” (David Burns, Housing Committee meeting, 3 July 2018).

“TRAs can and do play a huge role in supporting and developing strong communities, evidence as long as your arm on that. When they get together to form borough-wide or landlord-wide organisations, they have that strength in the shared knowledge and numbers, which can amplify their voice and ensure that they are heard. Previously we have seen landlord-wide tenants’ federations funded through small weekly levies on the rent, which enabled those groups to self-organise.” (Open-mic session)

The number of TRAs varies greatly between boroughs
Number of TRAs based in London boroughs estates or blocks, 2018



- 3.13 An additional strength of TRAs is that they are democratic and independent institutions: the committee that runs the TRA has to be elected and the membership is genuinely open to all tenants and leaseholders. In contrast, residents who sit on boards or other advisory groups set up by landlords tend to be either self-selected individuals or directly chosen by the landlord. For some, residents involved in such landlord-led structures might lack independence and autonomy to truly represent and report back to residents. A resident pointed out that “residents can go on the landlord management board, but if they do, they are not allowed to report what goes on to their fellow residents. This makes the gesture pointless.”¹³
- 3.14 Over the past decade the active membership of TRAs appears to have dropped. London boroughs and housing associations told us that they have seen a decline in the number of TRAs and in memberships. Some landlords said that they do not appeal to everyone on the estate or block, especially younger generations. The City of London, for instance, has “seen a significant

decline in traditional TRAs. Most residents don't have time to attend meetings when they are run formally (...)." Simon Theobald from the housing association Metropolitan told us that: "If there are [TRA] groups that still want to do that, we will support them to the hilt. The challenge is that there is a whole range of Generation X, Generation Y and Millennials who will not want to take time out of their weekends and evenings to do that."¹⁴

- 3.15 There are signs that social landlords are providing less support and funding to TRAs or other resident-led groups and, in particular, to borough-wide tenant federations. According to the London Tenants Federation: "in 2005/06 almost all boroughs still supported some form of borough-wide tenant federation, organisation or network. Since then, tenant-led borough-wide federations in Barnet, Camden, Hackney, Newham and Waltham Forest have either had funding removed, been reorganised to fit with new authority determined models or has just been derecognised."¹⁵ Residents told us that some boroughs had abolished borough-wide tenant federations. TRAs and other organisations¹⁶ also told us that councils were undermining TRAs by obliging them to adopt landlords' model constitutions or following certain criteria in terms of minimum membership.

4. Towards meaningful engagement

Key findings

- Personal interaction with managers, visible responsiveness of the management team and the ability for residents to have a real say over future decisions on housing services are all key for a meaningful engagement.
- Housing officers have a key role to play as the first port of call in housing management and resident engagement.
- Alongside an investment in housing officers, digital engagement strategies can help to ensure high levels of engagement.
- We heard from residents that many felt that resident engagement was too much of a box-ticking exercise. We have compiled seven good principles of resident engagement.

Towards meaningful engagement

- 4.1 Trust and understanding can be created by meaningful interactions between housing managers and their residents. Residents have strong views on what those interactions should include:

“What matters is not only listening to the tenants it’s also about taking action on what matters to tenants, it’s about communicating in a sensible way to tenants and being honest with them if things can’t be done right away (finance issues etc). It’s about being fair to tenants not just directing resources to one area and ignoring others, it’s about involving tenants in finance decisions and getting tenants involved in home improvements or major renovations at ALL stages, it’s not about dividing tenants or selecting tenants - all opinions matter not just those that Housing Departments agree with!” (resident submission)

- 4.2 Happily, this is in line with what we heard from social housing landlords; that resident engagement is crucial in shaping services tailored to residents and that residents should be involved as far as it is possible in everything that affects their lives.¹⁷
- 4.3 Key to a successful model is a degree of personal interaction with managers, visible responsiveness of the management team and the ability for residents to have a real say over future decisions on housing services. Also essential seems to be that resident engagement bodies seek to maximise and diversify participation, and engage in a timely fashion before decisions are made.

Reaffirming the value of housing officers

- 4.4 Housing officers supervise the management of rented properties that belong to local authorities. They have a range of responsibilities, including assessing the needs of people applying for housing, allocating vacant accommodation, carrying out inspections, dealing with anti-social behaviour, referring tenants to appropriate sources of benefits, and attending tenants meetings. In addition, they are the ones who work closely with other departments to meet residents’ needs.
- 4.5 As the first port of call for residents with concerns, housing officers have a key role to play in housing management and resident engagement. On resident said: “I think housing officers have a really important role which should be brought back, which is just that connection of who do you speak to and who is responsible”.¹⁸
- 4.6 But residents have raised the fact that they have less and less contact with housing officers: for example, one resident told us that “they [the council] have cut down the number of housing officers. They have basically reduced

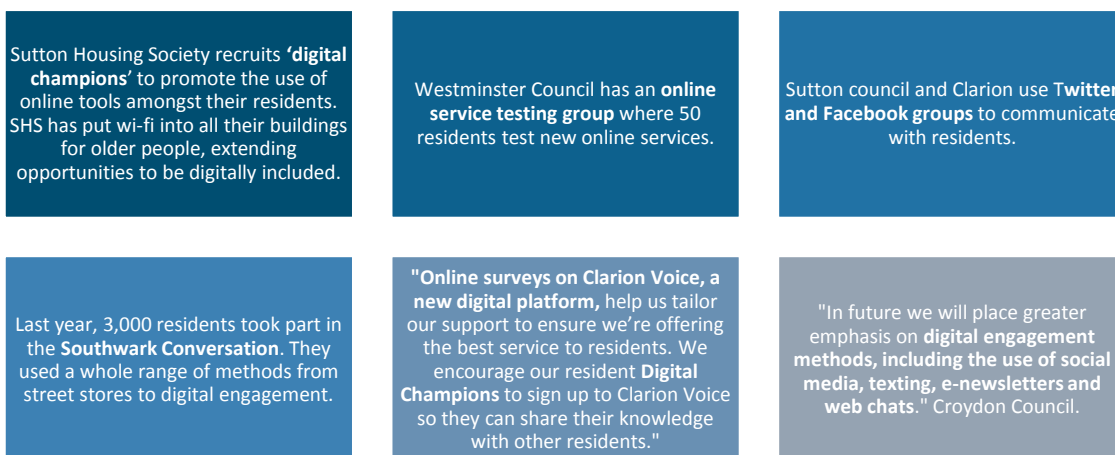
our contact with Tower Hamlet Homes to a call centre instead of a personal one-to-one.”¹⁹

- 4.7 In order to create opportunities for meaningful engagement we would like to see a reaffirmation of the value of the role of the housing officer. To help create that personal one-to-one contact that creates opportunities for meaningful engagement we therefore welcome the work of those social landlords who are looking to reduce the number of homes housing officers cover. The objective they told us they are aiming for is to free up housing officers’ time to increase engagement with residents.
- 4.8 Sutton council, for instance, recently reduced the housing officers patches from 1,000 to 400 homes. The council’s intention “is very much to mainstream resident engagement (...) We are trying to forge new relationships and really get to know our residents, to understand what their challenges are in their lives and help point them towards solutions.”²⁰
- 4.9 Some landlords are moving towards a ‘patchless’ system whereby residents can decide whether they want to speak to the first available officer or to a particular officer. After consulting residents, Optivo co-created with residents a patchless system and rolled it out incrementally.²¹ Alongside housing officers, they have a specialist team that is trained and skilled to deal with particular inquiries, such as financial inclusion or neighbour nuisance. The success of this new model is yet to be proven. Some resident groups have said that a ‘patchless’ system can cause inconsistency and problems for the most vulnerable residents.²²
- 4.10 Kingston Council has recently adopted a co-design approach to reshape housing services in the borough. Their experience has suggested that to deliver improvements, it needs to bring together in one space decision-makers, housing officers and residents and seek to problem solve together. They told us this approach has led to a “changing relationship between staff and residents. (...) They [residents] are feeling that their views, experiences and ideas are being listened to and valued like never before. They are also getting a new view on the housing service and how similar the needs and desires are between residents and staff.”²³

Embracing digital engagement

- 4.11 Alongside an investment in housing officers, we believe digital engagement strategies can help to ensure high levels of engagement and provide ways to reach out to residents who might not want to go to or might not feel comfortable in a formal TRA type meeting. Digital engagement could provide rapid feedback on day-to-day maintenance issues that, if left unattended, would create tension over relatively easily resolved queries.

- 4.12 Social housing landlord Optivo has a programme of digital engagement in order “to hear from a new generation of residents and remove barriers for those who aren’t able or interested in taking part in traditional forms of engagement.” This approach has worked so far for Southwark: “Last year we had over 15,000 responses through our online engagement hub on over 100 different consultations. That was a 75% increase from the previous year.”²⁴ At the start of 2018, Clarion launched a digital shift strategy. Early results have found that “the numbers of younger residents (up to 35 years of age) involved has increased by approximately 35% with the expansion of our digital offer.”²⁵



Examples of digital engagement initiatives by social landlords, written submissions to the London Assembly Economy Committee, 2018

- 4.13 A recently published report *Building Homes, Building Trust* by the Future Shape of the Sector Commission argued that digital engagement allows social landlords to engage with a wider number, and possibly more representative sample, of residents.²⁶ The commission also finds that technology offers social landlords the chance to regularly survey residents in the most cost-effective way. Likewise, for the chief executive of Notting Hill Genesis, Kate Davies, “digital is key to releasing resources so we can provide better, personalised services.” Digital will release officers from some admin tasks in order for them to spend most of their time “working within our neighbourhoods; listening and working alongside the people who live there, to give what help is needed to individuals, families and communities.”²⁷
- 4.14 We welcome and encourage the use of digital engagement in the sector as it has the potential to improve communication with residents as well as give easier access to services like repairs, update residents on their queries in real time, collect feedback and monitor residents’ satisfaction constantly.
- 4.15 Digital engagement cannot replace all the functions that face-to-face and resident-led engagement can bring. Indeed, we heard in our evidence from

both residents and landlords that many residents value face-to-face engagement. Clarion Housing Association, for instance, told us that “Over 350 residents (102 living in London) have expressed an interest in new face to face involvement activities.”²⁸ JMB Leathermarket encourages the use of meetings because it enables residents to debate and hear other people’s points of view.

Good principles for resident engagement

- 4.16 We heard from residents that many felt that resident engagement was too much of a box-ticking exercise. Here are some helpful principles for engaging with residents, drawn from across the evidence we received. They reflect submitted examples from residents of good practice, as well as lessons learned when problems have arisen. These principles may be useful for councils, housing associations, councillors and residents’ group.

1. Co-design services with residents from the outset

What residents said:

- "Provide opportunities for tenants to develop new ideas for, or alternative ways of, managing and maintaining homes"

2. Co-design the resident engagement structure with residents so that they have ownership

- "Before there was a bottom up resident structure of different layers, all of whom were elected and accountable to those they represent. (...). The council allowed the ALMO to abolish the housing panel (...)."
- "We have never been asked our opinion on reorganisation and cuts in staff, though we have sometimes given it"

3. Show residents how their contributions are being used to take decisions

- "Tenants need to see that their contributions are being recorded and where answers are not immediately forthcoming they need to be certain that they will be made publicly available on the next available occasion"
- "Tenants often (...) find that comments they have made in consultations have not been heard".

4. Commit to transparency: give residents full and open access to information

- "Access to the maximum possible information on the options for major projects. Enforcement cannot rely on slow-moving and limited FoI processes. (...) There should be a certificate of openness provided by an independent body".
- "Full and open disclosure of information. Publish every year capital works and involve tenants in how capital works are put together"

5. Have a clear, simple and easy procedure for complaints

- "As advertised, the system sounds quite good, but in reality, residents often get stuck in the system and can wait years for complaints and problems to be sorted out."
- "The complaints procedures of local authorities and housing associations should be simplified and made easier for residents to access."

6. Get buy-in from housing officers on resident engagement and maintain face-to-face engagement with residents

- "It often depends on the goodwill or professionalism of the individual housing officer whether we get anything done."
- "They have basically reduced our contact with Tower Hamlets Homes to a call centre instead of a personal one-to-one."

7. Support and work with independent, self-organised and representative tenant groups

- "There is no substitute for democratic and accountable tenants' associations and borough-wide federations. The loss of those has been a really serious blow to tenants all over London."
- "[Grassroots tenants' groups] play a huge role in supporting and developing strong, supportive local communities. When joined together to form borough- or land-lordwide organisations we gain strength in shared knowledge and numbers to amplify our voice and ensure we are heard."

5. Changing the culture of engagement

Key findings

- The Mayor has a strategic role to play, as he supports social housing through planning decisions and the disbursement of grants to local authorities and housing associations in London to build new homes.
- Our report makes recommendations to the Mayor to help change the culture of engagement between residents and landlords within the sector.
- This includes supporting the Social Housing Green Paper's proposal to increase transparency around the performance of landlords through key performance indicators on resident engagement and other areas.
- We also want the Mayor to appoint a Social Housing Commissioner for London who sits on the Homes for Londoners board.
- Finally, we would like the Mayor to base future funding to landlords on improvements in transparency and management in their organisations.

Changing the culture of engagement

- 5.1 The Mayor is not a social housing landlord but he has a strategic role to play, as he supports social housing through planning decisions and the disbursement of grants to local authorities and housing associations in London to build new homes. He will also be making representations to Government with regard to the Green Paper on social housing.
- 5.2 While the Housing Committee welcomes the Government's Social Housing Green Paper and the review of the regulation system, there are some specific actions that the Mayor can take to help change the culture of engagement between residents and landlords.

Influencing the Green Paper

- 5.3 The Housing Committee supports increased transparency about the performance of landlords, through measures in the Green Paper that would lead to key performance indicators (KPIs). The main areas for KPIs identified in the Green Paper are:
- Keeping properties in good repair
 - Maintaining the safety of buildings
 - Effective handling of complaints
 - Respectful and helpful engagement with residents
 - Responsible neighbourhood management, including tackling anti-social behaviour seem aligned with issues of key importance to residents
- 5.4 The committee agrees that these are the key areas where there should be KPIs to assess landlords' performance. However, the KPIs on 'respectful and helpful resident engagement with residents' should be changed to ensure that resident engagement is meaningful. Indeed, we found that many social housing landlords have well thought out approaches to engaging residents, but this does not guarantee meaningful engagement.
- 5.5 Key to successful engagement is a degree of personal interaction with managers, visible responsiveness of the management team and the ability for residents to have a real say over future decisions on housing services. Hence, the key performance indicators on resident engagement should follow the seven good principles identified in this report.
- 5.6 There may be merit in Government assessing the impact of the Scottish Social Housing Charter, which sets out "the standards and outcomes that tenants

can expect from social landlords, in terms of the quality and value for money of the services they receive, the standard of their homes, and opportunities for communication and participation in the decisions that affect them.”²⁹ In Scotland the regulator monitors, assesses and reports on landlords’ performance against the charter. Annual performance reports are submitted by social landlords with a strong input from residents.

Recommendation 1

The Housing Committee supports the Government’s call for KPIs to assess the performance of social landlords. The key performance indicators on resident engagement should be changed to help bring about engagement that is meaningful for tenants and managers and follow the good principles identified in this report.

A Social Housing Commissioner for London

- 5.7 A stronger regulatory system might appeal to some stakeholders as a way of strengthening the influence of residents. However, social landlords have the opportunity to move quickly, without regulation, to strengthen their resident engagement culture, learning from others and sharing best practice.
- 5.8 We would like the Mayor to appoint a London social housing commissioner, tasked with encouraging social housing landlords to promote participatory, meaningful and accountable ways of involving residents in decisions over the management of their blocks or estates.
- 5.9 In June, the Mayor called on the Government to appoint a social housing tenant as a national Commissioner for Social Housing Residents to influence national legislation.³⁰ Setting up a London Commissioner could strengthen the Mayor’s call by trialling it in London.
- 5.10 The social housing commissioner would be the voice of Londoners living in social housing. They would work on improving residents’ experiences and ensuring that resident voices are heard and considered when the GLA is allocating funds for new social homes, for example, and when local strategies and policies are shaped.
- 5.11 The Mayor has already appointed Claire Waxman as Victims Commissioner to ensure that the victims’ voice plays a part in shaping strategies, policies, and services in policing and crime. We want the Commissioner to do exactly that for Londoners living in social housing.

Recommendation 2

The Mayor should appoint a London social housing commissioner tasked with encouraging social housing landlords to promote participatory and meaningful ways of involving residents in decision making. The London social housing commissioner should be a champion of social housing residents' interests and encourage good practice in resident engagement across the sector.

- 5.12 One way for the London social housing commissioner to engage with social housing residents could be to establish an independent, community forum. The London Tenants Federation has asked for the Mayor to establish a community forum for social housing residents and homelessness groups to feed into policy work and to monitor outcomes.³¹
- 5.13 This independent platform that brings together residents would not only be helpful in hearing from a wide range of residents but would also give weight to the social housing commissioner when speaking on behalf of residents to local government. This should be supported by a regular conversation with residents via online surveys and chat forums.
- 5.14 The Mayor set up the Homes for Londoners board to advise him on housing policy, strategy and delivery. The board is composed of representatives from London Councils, Transport for London, London's largest housing associations and other representatives of London's property sector.
- 5.15 If the Mayor meets his target to start building 116,000 genuinely affordable homes by 2022, funded by £4.82bn of government money, many more Londoners will have social landlords. It will be more crucial than ever for the sector to promote meaningful and accountable ways of engaging residents and involve residents from the start in decision making about housing services.
- 5.16 The London social housing commissioner should therefore sit on the Homes for Londoners board to ensure that the good principles of meaningful engagement are considered at the table of future social homes in London. The commissioner should also play a key role in ensuring that new homes are meeting diverse need of social housing residents. Their task would be also to drive forward accountability and transparency agenda in the sector.

Recommendation 3

The London social housing commissioner should sit on the Homes for Londoners board to drive forward the accountability and transparency agenda in the sector.

Greater transparency in the sector

- 5.17 Residents are concerned that housing association residents are not able to use Freedom of Information (FOI) legislation to get information from their landlords and are not protected by the Public Sector Equality Duty (PSED).
- 5.18 The committee supports the transparency charter being developed by the National Housing Federation and the g15 group of London housing associations, to develop an accountability and transparency offer, but wants to see the Mayor tackle the issue directly.³²
- 5.19 We would like the Mayor to ensure that landlords that have contracts with the GLA through the Affordable Homes Programme put in place policies that are compliant with FOI and PSED principles and improve engagement and management structures.
- 5.20 While the Deputy Mayor for Housing and Residential Development has told us it is not possible to add new requirements to the current affordable homes programme (2016 – 2021)³³ we would strongly urge the Mayor to develop policies to increase transparency as part of future programmes.³⁴

Recommendation 4²

The Mayor should ensure that landlords who have contracts with the GLA for developing new affordable homes should improve transparency and management, as conditions introduced as part of future funding programmes. These should include compliance with Public Sector Equality Duty and Freedom of Information principles and, for example, simplifying management structures.

² The UKIP group does not agree that landlords should have to be compliant with PSED principles in future funding arrangements.

Our approach

The Housing Committee agreed the following terms of reference for this investigation:

- To establish the range and distribution of governance models in use in London's social housing
- To set out the purposes, extent and methods of resident involvement for each
- To highlight examples of housing providers using different methods of resident involvement and assess their efficiency in:
 - identifying risks and acting on them
 - learning lessons where failures have occurred.
 - providing high quality housing services.

The committee took oral evidence at two public meetings:

- On the 24 May 2018 the committee held an “open mic” session which was coordinated with the London Tenants Federation. It gave the opportunity for social housing residents to express their views on how they are involved in the management of their housing, and how this management could be improved.
- On the 3 July 2018 the committee held a public meeting with James Murray, Deputy Mayor for Housing and Residential Development; Ellen Storrar, Housing Policy Manager, Housing & Land, GLA; David Burns, Head of Housing Strategy, Hammersmith and Fulham; Simon Latham, Assistant Director, Environment, Housing, Planning and Regeneration, London Borough of Sutton; Steve Tucker, Managing Director, Sutton Housing Partnership; Michael Scorar, Strategic Director, Housing and Modernisation, Southwark Council; Paul Hackett, Chief Executive, Optivo; and Simon Theobald, Head of Customer Engagement, Metropolitan.

During the investigation, the committee also received written submissions from the following organisations:

- **Housing Associations:** London & Quadrant; Peabody; Notting Hill; Genesis; Clarion; A2Dominion; Anchor Trust; Metropolitan; Optivio; Tower Hamlets Community Housing.
- **Local Boroughs:** Brent; Camden; City of London; Croydon; Hackney; Hammersmith and Fulham; Haringey; Harrow; Islington; Kingston Upon Thames; Lewisham; Sutton; Tower Hamlets; Waltham Forest; Westminster; The London Fire Brigade.
- **Residents Groups:** Churchill Gardens Resident Association; Federation of Residents Kingston Upon Thames; Finsbury Estate Tenants and Residents Association; Fred Wigg and John Walsh Towers Tenants and Residents Association; Genesis Residents Action; London Tenants Federation; Maystar Residents Association; Newham Union of Tenants; Southwark Group of Tenants Organisations; Taroe Trust; Tenants and Residents Association for Hackney Housing Estate.
- We also received five individual submissions from social housing residents.

References

¹ MHCLG live table 100

² MHCLG live table 209

³ There are nine individual protected characteristics in the Equality Act: age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex, sexual orientation.

⁴ Government, [Right to Manage Guidance](#).

⁵ We have referred throughout to ‘social housing residents’ to include tenants, leaseholders and shared owners from social housing landlords.

⁶ CIH, [Going to the Market](#), 2013

⁷ Michael Scorer, Housing committee meeting, 3 July 2018

⁸ Housing Committee informal meeting, 23 May 2018

⁹ Written submissions

¹⁰ Written submissions

¹¹ Written submissions

¹² Written submissions

¹³ Written submissions

¹⁴ Simon Theobald, Housing committee meeting, 3 July 2018

¹⁵ Written submissions

¹⁶ Written submissions

¹⁷ Housing committee meeting, 3 July 2018

¹⁸ Housing committee informal meeting, 24 May 2018

¹⁹ Housing committee informal meeting, 24 May 2018

²⁰ Steve Tucker, Housing committee meeting, 3 July 2018

²¹ Paul Hackett, Housing committee meeting, 3 July 2018

²² Written submissions

²³ Written submissions

- ²⁴ Michael Scorer, Housing committee meeting, 3 July 2018
- ²⁵ Written submissions
- ²⁶ Considering the future shape of the housing association sector: June 2018 [Building Homes, Building Trust](#)
- ²⁷ Inside Housing, July 2018, [Tenants' trust in associations is low – so we are looking at a new model.](#)
- ²⁸ Written submissions
- ²⁹ [Scottish Social Housing Charter](#)
- ³⁰ Press release, June 2018, [Sadiq calls for social housing tenant to be appointed as Commissioner](#)
- ³¹ LTF 8 asks to the Mayor, London Housing Committee meeting in May 2018
- ³² NHF, [Discussion paper](#): accountability and transparency in the housing association sector, August 2018
- ³³ Letter from James Murray to Sian Berry, Chair of the Housing Committee, 15 August 2018
- ³⁴ Housing Committee meeting in July and letter from James Murray to Sian Berry

Other formats and languages

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Chinese

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Hindi

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Arabic

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الإلكتروني أعلاه.

Gujarati

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Front cover photo: Residents of West Kensington and Gibbs
Green launch their People's Plan for their estates.