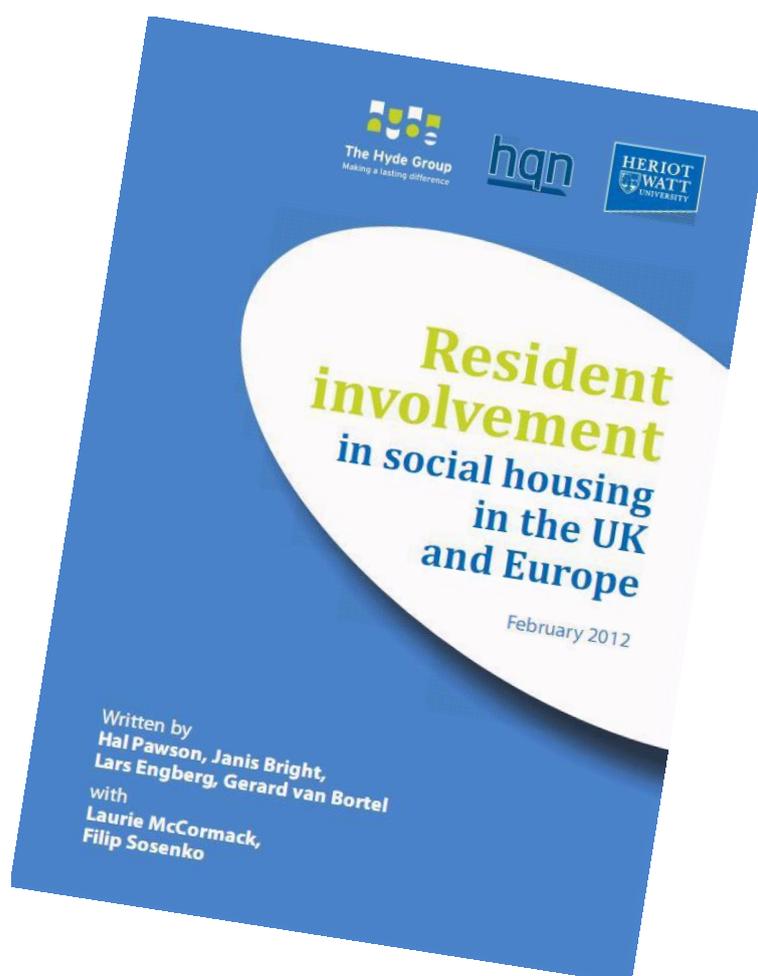


# Resident involvement in social housing in the UK and Europe: research and good practice

February 2012

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## Summary

This briefing reports on a research project commissioned by Hyde Housing Group and carried out by HQN with Heriot-Watt University.<sup>1</sup> The research looked in detail at resident involvement in four countries: England, Belgium, the Netherlands and Denmark. Each country has its own distinct housing culture and traditions of resident involvement, but we believe the research offers pointers for many in the UK to strengthen their own work in this area.

Resident involvement in social housing is about how tenants and communities can influence their landlords. It might better be described as resident empowerment, or community engagement.

The research found many examples of improvements as a direct result of resident involvement – some are detailed here. Shorter stays in social housing and the localism agenda both create challenges to housing providers. On the other hand, some tried and test approaches and especially the personal touch have not been bettered. Whatever your organisation's approach, we can certainly say that resident involvement is a dynamic area of change in all four countries, offering opportunities for all organisations to improve their practice.

### ***Some of the main points:***

There is much common ground among the four countries despite differing traditions of housing and involvement. All of the landlords are trying to widen the range of opportunities for residents to get involved, and to deepen their engagement with chances for real decision making.

Denmark offers the most radical alternative to the English system. There, tenants have all the decision-making power, backed by law, and it is held mainly at the local level. Nevertheless, the system is not a panacea: residents need training, motivation and commitment to enable good decision-making. They rely on the management professionals they hire to support them.

Even with determination, it is hard to get a cross-section of people involved. All of the landlords in the study struggled to engage 'hard-to-reach' groups. But there have been notable successes by using a 'menu of involvement' that tailors the type of engagement opportunities to suit people's lives and interests.

Other points in brief:

- Landlords increasingly recognise that there is a business case for engaging with residents as well as it being 'the right thing to do'

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<sup>1</sup> The full report *Resident involvement in social housing in the UK and Europe* is available to download from the HQN website [www.hqnetwork.co.uk](http://www.hqnetwork.co.uk)

- Know your customers. In the UK that means investing in technology, getting your resident profiling completed and putting it to use
- Residents need good quality, unbiased information to help them make good decisions. Share detailed data with residents and use it to promote sophisticated debate
- Use the human touch – it hasn't been bettered. Get out and visit people, phone them, find out what they want and how they would like to be more involved
- Balancing localism and equal access in service delivery remains a challenge. Organisations in the study have taken different yet well reasoned approaches.

## The research

A team of six researchers reported on resident involvement in each country. The nine case studies included two large social landlords each in Belgium, the Netherlands and Denmark. In England, three large social landlords recognised as leaders on resident involvement took part. In each case board members, officers and residents were interviewed.

All of the landlords were moving toward an approach that combines the rights of individuals and the consumer power of choice. Recognising that many residents do not want to commit to long-term involvement or do not expect to stay long, they were creating new types of time-limited opportunity for involvement.

This section comprises seven topics:

- Models for resident empowerment, scrutiny and influence
- Two topical issues: shorter stays in social housing, and localism
- Developing the 'menu of involvement'
- The potential of incentive and rewards schemes to increase involvement
- Involving hard-to-reach groups and promoting equality
- Sharing information
- Recording, monitoring and measuring resident engagement activities, and giving feedback.

## *Models for resident empowerment, scrutiny and influence*

Housing organisations across the four study countries have been going through rapid change in law and regulation. In England, the move to ‘co-regulation’, with its emphasis on tenants holding their landlords to account, has cemented the shift towards consumerism. Some examples of different approaches included:

- Denmark uses a ‘tenants’ democracy’ model. Here, residents have majority board membership at all levels
- Large housing associations typically have organisation-wide panels or main board sub-committees where residents hold at least half the places. There was typically a detailed agreement between landlord body and panel to set the remit
- The panel at one Dutch organisation could advise on a wide range of policy issues – including strategic matters such as a proposed merger
- A Belgian organisation’s tenant advisory group was entitled to receive a management response to any proposal or query within six weeks
- English resident representatives had helped develop a plan for what a proposed merger should deliver – including a group-wide transfer scheme and improved customer services.

In England, the organisations were increasingly focusing on regional forums. Recruitment to these and other bodies is increasingly by advertising and selection. Resident involvement structures at all three English organisations also included function-specific working groups or panels.

- At one, there were six group-wide service improvement groups of residents. These covered estate services, property services, leasehold services, customer services, supported housing, and anti-social behaviour. At the same level were two other resident groups, the diversity panel covering the six main equalities strands, and the disability forum
- Under a slightly different model, resident-chaired issues and business groups were sub-committees of the overall tenants’ and residents’ federation. These brought together staff and residents to inform the federation’s thinking on repairs, customer services and service quality.

## ***Two topical issues: shorter stays in social housing, and localism***

The research offered insights into two issues that are politically 'hot' in England and represent part of the changing landscape of housing provision.

In Denmark particularly, the average length of tenancies has fallen to seven years as people increasingly see social housing as a stepping stone to ownership. Landlords in all four countries were attempting to offer a new range of involvement choices that fit their residents' lives and met their wish for limited involvement. Examples included:

- A readers' panel targeted at residents who did not want to attend meetings. It was used to consult on proposed policy or procedure documents or publicity material
- Short-term involvement on regeneration projects to give residents 'a glimpse of the process', with the landlord taking on much of the professional burden that tenants did not want to shoulder themselves
- 'Top-and-tail' actions or projects that had a clear start and finish, and could be treated as a one-off. This draws in many people who might not otherwise have participated.

The three English cases were particularly asked about their approach to localism and 'local offers'. The responses revealed two distinct approaches emerging:

- One group had a policy of 'tailored inconsistency' for different geographical areas, subsidiaries, and involvement structures. This gives enough flexibility to allow for inherited cultures and local practices within what is now a very large organisation. The group had, however, introduced a 'tenant participation tracker' where each division recorded its local activity. This was used to aid consistency and awareness
- Another considered the idea of locally differing services but firmly rejected it on the advice of residents. Here, the idea of a standard product that residents 'buy into' on the same terms wherever they are has taken root. Involved residents were emphatic in their support for this approach: to do otherwise would in their eyes be unfair and unacceptable.

## ***Developing the 'menu of involvement'***

There was a strong shared commitment to treating tenants as service users or customers. Critical to this is the idea that residents can choose their level of involvement, and especially types of involvement that suit their lives and interests. Numerous examples came to light, some of them familiar in England:

- A Dutch organisation had run a photography project where residents were given cameras and asked to record their daily lives with all the pros and cons of where they live. The results were directly used to help draw up a 'vision' for the neighbourhood

- Resident estate inspectors: large numbers of people can be involved – about 100 were active across the estates managed by one English landlord
- A Belgian association had volunteer ‘block champions’ who kept an eye on things locally and reported any problems, particularly with nuisance
- A specially designed game, ‘The price is right’, played in a consultation exercise to prioritise spending and establish priorities between competing demands – and to have fun, which was also regarded as important.

### ***The potential of incentive and rewards schemes to increase involvement***

The practice on rewards systems varied. The most important thing is to promote an ethos where the respectful treatment of resident opinions and complaints encourages constructive dialogue and mutual understanding.

One English organisation had informally measured the benefits of cash or voucher rewards. They concluded that higher payment compared with other local organisations was helping them recruit and keep involved residents.

Several landlords paid resident board members and/or other representatives at senior level, to recognise their responsibility and commitment. In Denmark members of the main board were paid but all other involvement was unpaid (in line with Danish law).

- At one the ethos was to ‘be rewarding’ rather than to give rewards, so only expenses (including childcare) were paid in general
- At another residents who volunteered for quality assurance, inspecting and so on were ‘paid’ in shopping vouchers. Further up the involvement ladder, committed residents who were taking on higher responsibilities received payments, with extra for chairing.
- Others preferred to offer publicised prizes and awards
- A certificate of involvement for young people who joined activities and received training in, for example, running a meeting
- A children’s project to learn skills and have tea and cake. They also talked to people in the neighbourhood about cleaning up the environment. Participants received a diploma from the mayor in a ceremony with residents. As a form of warm-up for a large future regeneration project, the project helped to create a buzz in the neighbourhood
- Annual awards in three categories: youth, significant contribution to the community, and improving community cohesion.

## *Involving hard-to-reach groups and promoting equality*

All of the landlords recognised the over-representation of older white men among involved tenants as problematic. Several had tried to draw in groups such as young people and ethnic minority households. Crucial to addressing equalities issues and involving hard-to-reach groups was creating a mix of opportunities from the 'menu of involvement'. But it was by no means a panacea: landlords reported continuing challenges in this area.

- Cited examples included fun days to draw in families, youth activities to engage young people, minority culture events and/or translated literature to involve ethnic communities
- In England the situation has been complicated by the recent emergence of eight 'protected characteristics' in place of the previous 'equalities strands' (Equality Act 2010). Two significant categories highlighted here but not usually considered a 'hard-to-reach' group in Europe are lesbians and gay men, and bisexual and transgender people. One English landlord was developing an initiative to reach these groups using its staff LGBT group.

## *Sharing information*

Study landlords generally agreed that to achieve resident empowerment rather than simply participation a key requirement was to share information. This helped to build openness and trust. In fact, openly providing information was used in some cases to support robust challenge to the organisation via resident scrutiny. Examples of activities included:

- Websites, sometimes with a dedicated section for residents or even a separate site, newsletters in both paper and electronic formats, brochures, handbooks and annual reports
- Information on, for example, how to report repairs or how the structure of involvement works was presented in a straightforward way that was easily understandable
- A Dutch organisation had 30 full-time staff on its communications team
- A Danish landlord had hired a journalist to write news for its website. The reporter had secured an interview with the Minister of Social Affairs
- An English landlord had launched a standard called 'Resident Approved' for its communications, which were checked by volunteer residents.

Residents need support and training to take on the challenges of involvement, and to stay involved after an initial contact. Good decision-making and the ability to challenge or scrutinise often depends on skills and experience. Support could include:

- Training and mentoring plus specialised individual coaching for new board members

- A budget to enable local resident organisations to function, with regional or service specific committees also supported.

The personal approach that gives a large organisation a human face has not been bettered, it seems, when it comes to drawing people in and keeping them involved. Some of the study organisations had gone to great lengths to ‘humanise’ their contact with residents.

- Making a visit to the resident. This could help to build a relationship that encouraged the person to get involved either as a consumer (one-off panels, estate inspection and so on) or within the formal involvement structure (estate meetings and boards, service improvement groups)
- A Dutch organisation had restructured to form a dedicated involvement team with 32 staff. It had a peer supervision project to promote best practice
- A high level resident committee chair of an English landlord was being mentored to carry out annual appraisals of fellow members, in a process that paralleled the process for main board members.

### ***Recording, monitoring and measuring resident engagement activities, and giving feedback***

Just as a private sector firm carries out market research to drive investment in new products, landlords saw it as important to do the same and thereby help tailor their services to current and future resident demands. But many of the resident involvement activities cited are relatively new. Monitoring, recording and measuring resident involvement therefore remained at an early stage.

Some landlords had recorded the number of residents becoming involved, their characteristics and their type of engagement over time. This was providing encouraging results that showed increasing numbers of ‘involved residents’ and a wider spread of participation among resident groups.

An increasingly recognised need has been to develop a comprehensive database on customers. Two case study landlords in particular were seeking to build a more sophisticated database of their tenant population. They wanted to record not only basic information on residents – who lived in each home – but also their preferences. One was building its information base on customers’ economic circumstances. This type of activity will be crucial to provide more individually tailored services, they believe.

Landlords were keen to demonstrate that residents’ views and preferences about services did result in changes that residents wanted. The actions could be responses to particular situations, or policy level changes as a result of scrutiny. Some examples of direct reactions to resident demands, advice or requests included:

- Major revisions to a group car parking enforcement contract

- Changes to the costs charged to residents for repairs associated with vandalism and anti-social behaviour
- One organisation found that some residents were dissatisfied with complaints handling. Residents were invited to review and improve response letters, and they made a video about how to complain, which was posted to the website
- Routinely offering 'you said – we did' feedback in newsletters. Publishing an annual 'What matters to residents' report
- 'Impact assessments' to appraise the effect of any resident involvement activity
- A tool for use in researching and developing social capital among residents. Local organisations could buy the package which measures the strength or weakness of 'social glue' between communities, and develop capacity-building responses from it. Staff would analyse the findings and make recommendations, which the now-more-empowered community could take forward
- Developing a 'toolbox' for staff in support of the menu of involvement. The online resource would help staff to select the best idea or technique in particular situations, to stimulate involvement and ensure different options were considered.

All of the ideas given here, and more, are contained in the full report, *Resident involvement in social housing in the UK and Europe*. The research team comprised: Hal Pawson, Janis Bright, Lars Engberg, Gerard van Bortel, Laurie McCormack and Filip Sosenko. With thanks to all of the case study participants.

HQN is the largest independent housing training and consultancy company in the UK. Around 700 housing organisations subscribe to The Housing Quality Network or one of HQN's specialist networks. Our membership base consists of over 4,200 individual member contacts from around the UK, who benefit from high quality briefings and workshops on a wide range of issues affecting the sector. We also provide bespoke consultancy and research, in-house training, interim management (The Pool), executive recruitment (The Source) and host a comprehensive programme of conferences and seminars.

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