Scottish Housing Regulator

National Panel of Tenants and Service Users

Year 3 (2015-16) Headline Report

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CONTENTS

SUMMARY FINDINGS

The National Panel fits into SHR's wider approach to communication and engagement with users of social landlord services, and is used to gauge their priorities and experiences. In this way the Panel findings help to shape SHR's focus in its role as regulator of social landlords. Panel members are volunteers and the Panel remains open to new recruits on an ongoing basis, with **membership standing at 481** as at June 2016 (up from 430 at the time of the last Panel report).

There were four main exercises conducted with the National Panel in its third year (2015-16): (i) a **full survey** of Panel members; (ii) **two "Vox Pop"** text message and web-based surveys; (iii) **in-depth qualitative** discussions with 87 Panel members; and (iv) visits with **homeless service units** (51 interviews completed).

This programme of work sought to explore service users' views across a range of topics including: the drivers of service satisfaction; rents, affordability and value for money; dealing with anti-social behaviour; landlord performance reporting; keeping service users informed and involved; experiences of homeless service users; and understanding and awareness of SHR. Elements of this work programme also link to other aspects of SHR's work, including analysis of the Scottish Social Housing Charter and the ongoing SHR Thematic Inquiry Programme.

This report brings together the **headline findings of the survey and discussion groups with panel members, and covers tenant satisfaction, rents and value for money, landlord performance reporting and awareness of SHR.** Further reports throughout the year will cover the remaining topics in more detail.

A Satisfied Customer

This theme considered Panel members' feedback on what it means to be "a satisfied customer". This theme, and more specifically the key drivers of tenant satisfaction with landlord services, was considered across the Panel survey and qualitative strands. The detail of the theme also links directly to SHR analysis and reporting of the Scottish Social Housing Charter.[1] Key points of note are:

- **Quality of home** was identified as the single most important factor for Panel members being "a satisfied customer" - **affordability of rents** and speed of **response to emergency repairs** are also particularly important.
- Survey feedback suggest that levels of **rent arrears**, **speed of allocations**, and **comparability of rents** to other landlords are the least important factors for individuals feeling like "a satisfied customer".
- This profile of satisfaction drivers is broadly similar to those reported across previous surveys - the quality of home, affordability of rents and speed of emergency repairs remain the three most significant satisfaction drivers.

[1] For more information on the Charter and SHR National Reports on the Charter, please see SHR's website.

Value for Money and Rents

This theme considered views on what value for money means for users of social landlord services, and views/experiences in relation to affordability of rents and service charges. Key points of note are:

- Survey results identify a number of important drivers of Panel members' value for money judgements – in particular quality of landlord's service, capital investment in tenants' home, affordability and the size of annual rent increases.
- Comparability of social rents was rated as significantly less important for individuals' sense of whether their landlord's services are value for money.
- Few respondents reported any current rent affordability concerns, but nearly 4 in 5 expressed concerns regarding the possibility of future affordability problems caused by rent increases or changes to their income.
- These findings are broadly in line with those reported through previous Panel reports. However, the more in-depth work with Panel members on value for money has identified a greater role for rent increases to impact views on value for money, and potentially an increase in concerns around future affordability of rents.

Reporting on Landlord Performance

This theme considered Panel members' awareness and views on landlord performance reporting. This includes awareness of and interest in their landlord's performance reporting, and the extent to which Panel members have seen any recent change in their landlord's performance. Panel members were also asked about their understanding of and interest in how their landlord operates. Key points of note are:

- Survey results show that the majority of respondents feel well informed about how their landlord is performing. Most had seen information in the last year on their landlord's performance, and respondents generally found this useful.
- Survey results also show strong interest in landlord performance information, particularly on the quality of homes, speed of emergency repair response, and annual rent increases. This is consistent with the importance of factors such as quality of home, affordability and speed of repairs response as key drivers of service satisfaction.
- A large majority of respondents expressed some degree of interest in how their landlord operates. Interest is strongest in relation to how landlords make sure that they are accountable to tenants, how landlords are run as an organisation, financial management, and service planning and improvement.
- Panel members' understanding of how their landlord operates was somewhat mixed, with around a quarter of respondents unclear on areas such as their

landlord's financial management and approach to service planning and improvement. A large majority of respondents expressed interest in hearing more about these areas.

- For those expressing potential interest in getting more involved in their landlord's governance and scrutiny, this appeared to depend on the purpose or focus of tenant involvement. Several participants stated that they would be more likely to get involved where this was focused on an issue which affected them.

The Scottish Housing Regulator

This theme sought to gauge Panel members' awareness of SHR's work over the last year, and the extent to which members' views on SHR had changed over this time. Given SHR's indirect relationship with tenants and service users, awareness levels are not expected to be comparable to that for social landlord services. Rather, the primary focus in exploring this theme was to gauge any change in awareness over the last year, and to explore Panel members' understanding and perception of SHR's work. Key points of note are:

- More than half of survey respondents had seen or heard about SHR's work in the last year. This is an encouraging finding in the context of SHR's indirect relationship with users of social landlord services, and represents an increase from the 2014/15 survey.
- More than half of respondents indicated that they understand SHR's role and how this helps service users.
- Survey responses suggest a positive trend in awareness of and opinion on the value of SHR and its work. Half of respondents indicated they are more aware of SHR and its work than a year ago, and two fifths have a more positive opinion of SHR than a year ago.
- Promotion of more effective tenant scrutiny, and a focus on rent and service charge levels were the two most commonly suggested priority areas for SHR's ongoing work.

1 INTRODUCTION

Background

1.1 The National Panel was established in spring/summer 2013 as a way for the Scottish Housing Regulator (SHR) to engage with tenants and other users of social landlord services. The National Panel fits into SHR's wider approach to communication and engagement with users of social landlord services, and is used to gauge priorities and experiences – and in this way help to shape SHR's focus in its role as regulator of social landlords.

1.2 As a mechanism for gathering the views of tenants and other service users, a significant element of the Panel's value is as an accessible group of engaged individuals willing to participate in consultation exercises. As such the focus for the Panel is on ensuring a good cross-section of tenants and other service users. This is a key element of our ongoing promotion and recruitment work around the Panel which seeks to expand the reach of the Panel in terms of the size of the membership, and also representation of specific population subgroups. This ongoing work has increased the overall Panel membership to 481 at the time writing (from 430 at the time of the last Panel report), despite a small number of Panel members choosing to leave over the last year.

1.3 A profile of the current Panel membership is appended to this report.

2015/16 Programme

1.4 The third year of Panel engagement sought to build on results from years 1 and 2, tracking results over time and exploring service users' views in more depth around drivers of service satisfaction; rents, affordability and value for money; dealing with anti-social behaviour; landlord performance reporting; keeping service users informed and involved; experiences of homeless service users; and understanding and awareness of SHR.

1.5 Elements of this work programme also link to other aspects of SHR's work. For example, our work on perceptions of 'a satisfaction customer' links directly to the SHR analysis of landlords' performance against the Charter. Other elements of the engagement work also link to the ongoing SHR Thematic Inquiry Programme. Findings from the National Panel relating to both the SHR Charter analysis and the Thematic Programme will also be included in a series of individual SHR publications throughout 2016/17.

1.6 The table over the page summarises the main strands of the 2015/16 engagement programme.

Overview of 2015/15 Programme

Engagement strand	Response	Timing	Themes addressed: Satisfied customer	Value for money	Antisocial behaviour	Informed & involved	SHR	Homeless services
Full Panel survey - postal, web and telephone response options	58% response	Autumn 2015	•	•	•	•	•	
"Vox pop" SMS and web-based surveys x 2	108 members	Nov 15 Feb 16		•		•		
Qualitative research with 87 Panel members, discussion groups and telephone interviews	87 members	Jan-Mar 2016		•		•		
Visits to homeless service units (51 interviews completed)	51 households	Feb-Mar 2016						•

1.7 This report integrates both quantitative results (i.e. statistical survey findings) and qualitative findings (i.e. from the discursive work with Panel members and users of homeless services exploring their experiences, views and motivations in more detail) to provide a rounded view of participants' priorities and experiences. The report structure reflects the main themes around which quantitative and qualitative work was based.

1.8 This first report on Year 3 brings together the **headline findings** of the panel survey along with more detailed feedback from discussion on the drivers of customer satisfaction, rents, affordability and value for money, landlord performance reporting and awareness and understanding of SHR's role and publications.

1.9 Further separate reports throughout the year will cover the other topics in more detail. These will include panel members' views on how landlords report their performance; on being kept informed and involved by their landlord; their experiences of anti-social behaviour and views on landlords' responses and finally, feedback from users of homelessness services across Scotland.

2 A SATISFIED CUSTOMER

2.1 This section considers Panel members' feedback on what it means to be "a satisfied customer". This theme, and more specifically the key drivers of tenant satisfaction with landlord services, was considered across the Panel survey and qualitative strands.

2.2 The detail of the theme links directly to SHR analysis and reporting of the Scottish Social Housing Charter.[2] SHR analysis identified the 12 Charter indicators most closely linked to reported tenant satisfaction levels. National Panel survey questions and qualitative work reflected these indicators, asking panel members to rate and discuss their relative importance and meaning. This section considers survey results and qualitative feedback on these indicators.

Key points of note…

Quality of home was identified as the single most important factor for Panel members being a "a satisfied customer" - affordability of rents and speed of response to emergency repairs are also particularly important.

Survey feedback suggest that levels of rent arrears, speed of allocations, and comparability of rents to other landlords are the least important factors for individuals feeling like "a satisfied customer".

This profile of satisfaction drivers is broadly similar to those reported across previous surveys - the quality of home, affordability of rents and speed of emergency repairs remain the three most significant satisfaction drivers.

Survey results

2.3 The survey listed a range of aspects of landlord services and asked Panel members to identify which were most important to whether they are a "satisfied customer", and which factors were least important. Respondents were able to select up to three factors as most important, and up to three as least important to their satisfaction with services.

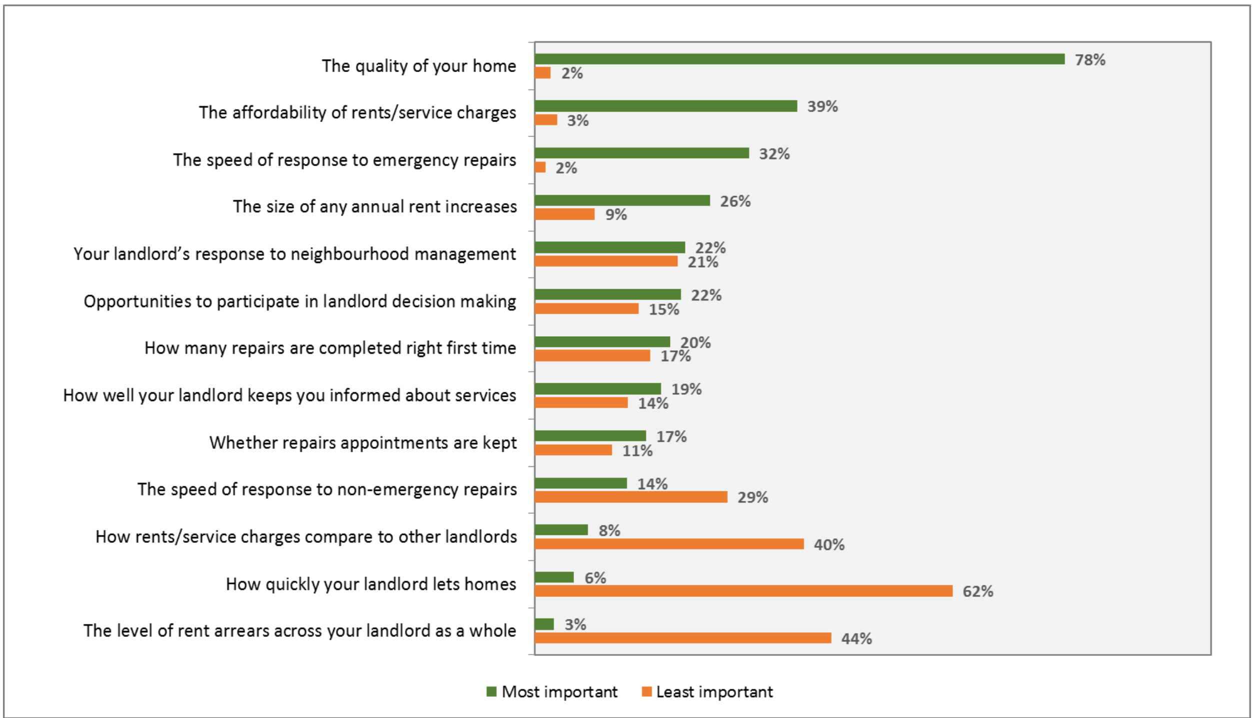
2.4 ***Survey results indicate that quality of home is the single most important factor for Panel members being a "a satisfied customer"***, with affordability of rents and speed of response to emergency repairs also particularly important. As Figure 1 indicates, the quality of your home was by some margin the most commonly cited satisfaction driver (by 78%) – and was also the most commonly mentioned when Panel members were asked to name the single most important thing for their satisfaction. The affordability of rents/service charges and speed of emergency repairs response were also mentioned by a substantial proportion of respondents (39% and 32% respectively). Interestingly, emergency repairs response was significantly more likely to be cited as a key satisfaction driver than non-emergency repair response (by 32% and 14% respectively).

[2] For more information on the Charter and the SHR National Report on the Scottish Social Housing Charter for 2015/16, please see SHR's website.

2.5 While all aspects of service were important satisfaction drivers for some respondents, survey results suggest that levels of rent arrears, speed of allocations, and comparability of rents to other landlords are the least important factors for individuals feeling like "a satisfied customer". Nearly two thirds of respondents rated speed of allocations as least important to their service satisfaction (62%), and around 2 in 5 rated overall rent arrears and comparability of rents as their least important satisfaction drivers (44% and 40% respectively).

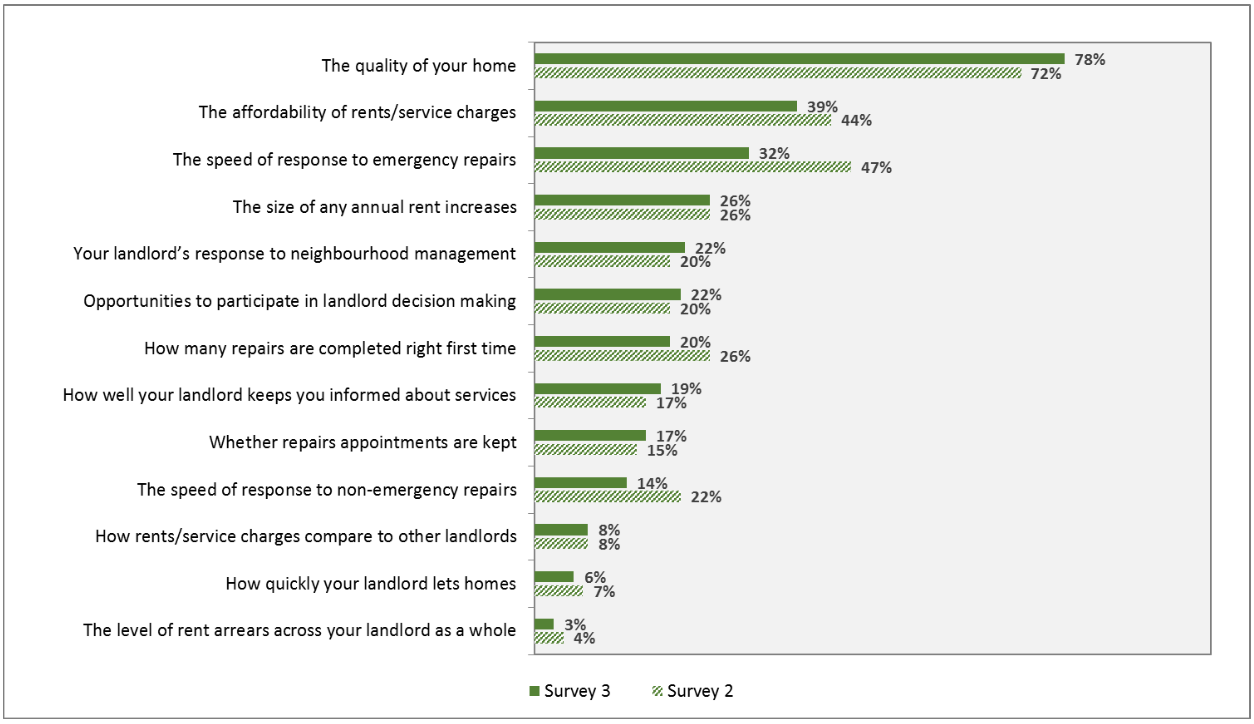
2.6 There is some consistency evident between the factors influencing satisfaction with services, and findings considered later in this report in relation to drivers of views on value for money. In particular, rent affordability and the size of annual rent increases were amongst the most significant factors for views on whether landlords are providing value for money, while comparability of rents with other landlords was less important for respondents' sense of value for money. However, more in-depth feedback from Panel members suggests that this may be in part related to a lack of awareness of how rent levels compare across landlords.

Figure 1: What is most/least important for whether you are a "satisfied customer"?



2.7 ***The profile of satisfaction drivers reported above are broadly similar to those reported by the second Panel survey in 2014/15***. There has been some variation in the proportion of respondents mentioning specific factors (e.g. a fall of 15 percentage points in those mentioning speed of emergency repairs response), but the overall ranking of these factors remains largely unchanged. The quality of home, affordability of rents and speed of emergency repairs remain the three most significant satisfaction drivers. Similarly, overall rent arrears, speed of allocations and comparability of rents remain the factors seen as least important to individuals being "a satisfied customer".

Figure 2: Most important factors for a "satisfied customer" – change over time



3 VALUE FOR MONEY AND RENTS

3.1 This section considers views on what value for money means for users of social landlord services, and views/experiences in relation to affordability of rents and service charges. This section brings together survey results on the key factors driving Panel members' value for money judgements, and detailed qualitative feedback.

> ***Key points of note…***
>
> Survey results identify a number of important drivers of Panel members' value for money judgements – in particular quality of landlord's service, capital investment in tenants' homes, affordability and the size of annual rent increases.
>
> Comparability of social rents was rated as significantly less important for individuals' sense of whether their landlord's services are value for money.
>
> Few respondents reported any current any rent affordability concerns, but nearly 4 in 5 expressed concerns regarding the possibility of future affordability problems caused by rent increases or changes to their income.
>
> These findings are broadly in line with those reported through previous Panel reports. However, the more in-depth work with Panel members on value for money has identified a greater role for rent increases to impact views on value for money, and potentially an increase in concerns around future affordability of rents.

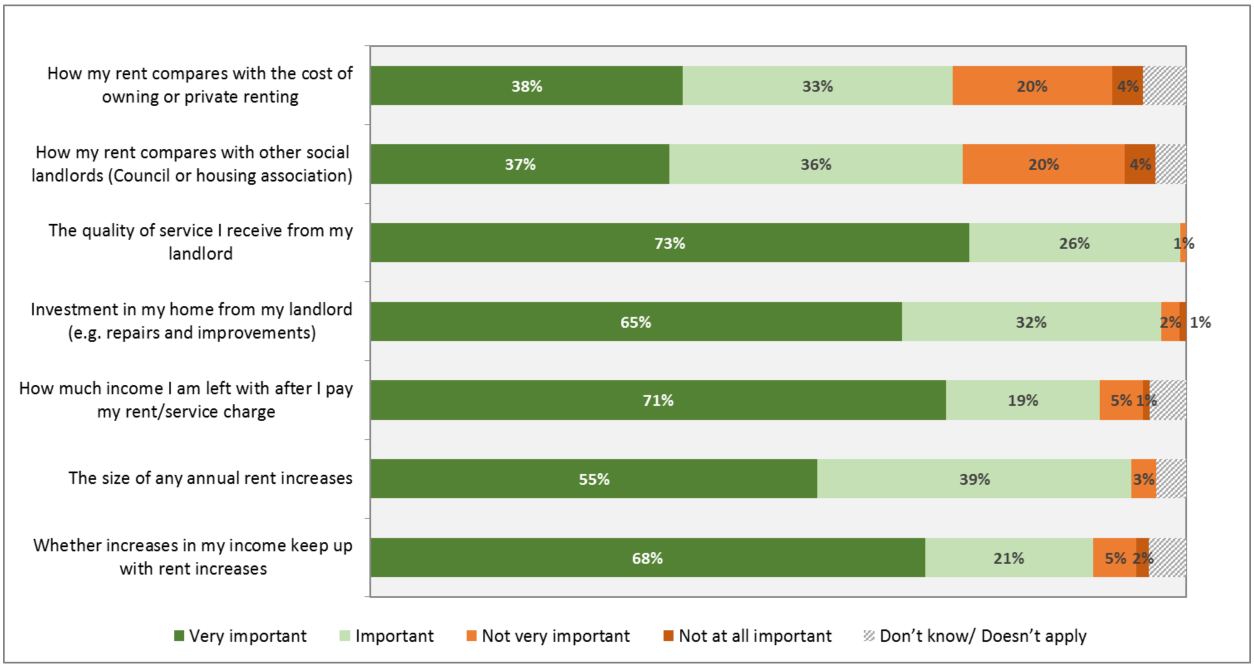
Survey results

3.2 In relation to value for money, the survey asked Panel members to rate the importance of a range of factors for their sense of whether their landlord's services are value for money. Results are presented at Figure 3 over the page.

3.3 Survey results identify ***a number of important drivers of Panel members' value for money judgements – in particular quality of landlord's service, capital investment in tenants' home, affordability and the size of annual rent increases***. Nearly all respondents rated these as important for their sense of value for money, including a majority who described these as "very important"; 73% for quality of service, 65% for capital investment, 71% for how much income tenants are left with after paying rent/service charges, 68% for whether income keeps up with rent increases, and 55% for the size of annual rent increases.

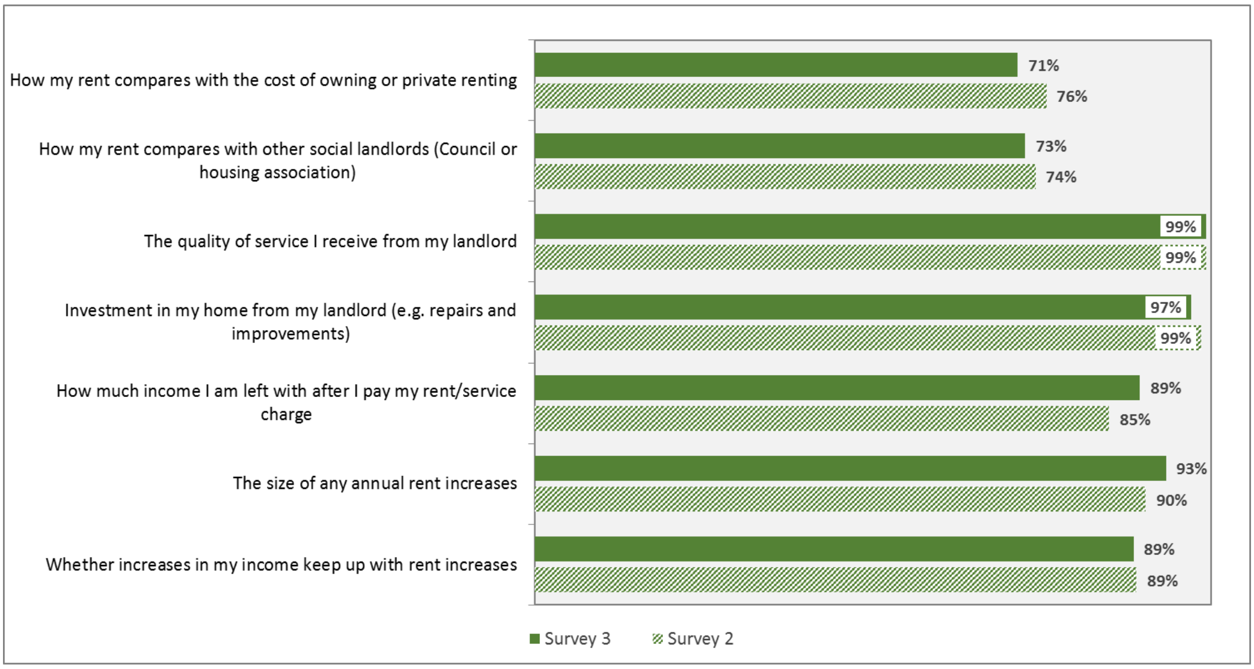
3.4 Comparability of social rents was rated as significantly less important for individuals' sense of whether their landlord's services are value for money. Respondents were significantly less likely to rate comparability of rent with other social landlords, or comparability with owning or private renting as very important to their sense of value for money. This is consistent with survey findings considered in the previous section, which showed that rent comparability is generally seen as less important than most other factors for respondents' satisfaction with services. However, more in-depth feedback through discussion groups (considered later in this section) suggests a more complex picture, with rent comparability a more significant driver of views for the minority of service users who have a good understanding of how their rent compares with that charged by other landlords.

Figure 3: How important are the following for your sense of whether landlord services are "value for money"?



3.5 As Figure 4 shows, there has been very little change since survey 2 in 2014/15 in views on factors driving views on "value for money". Survey results show no significant variation in rating of specific factors, and the overall ranking of factors also remains unchanged.

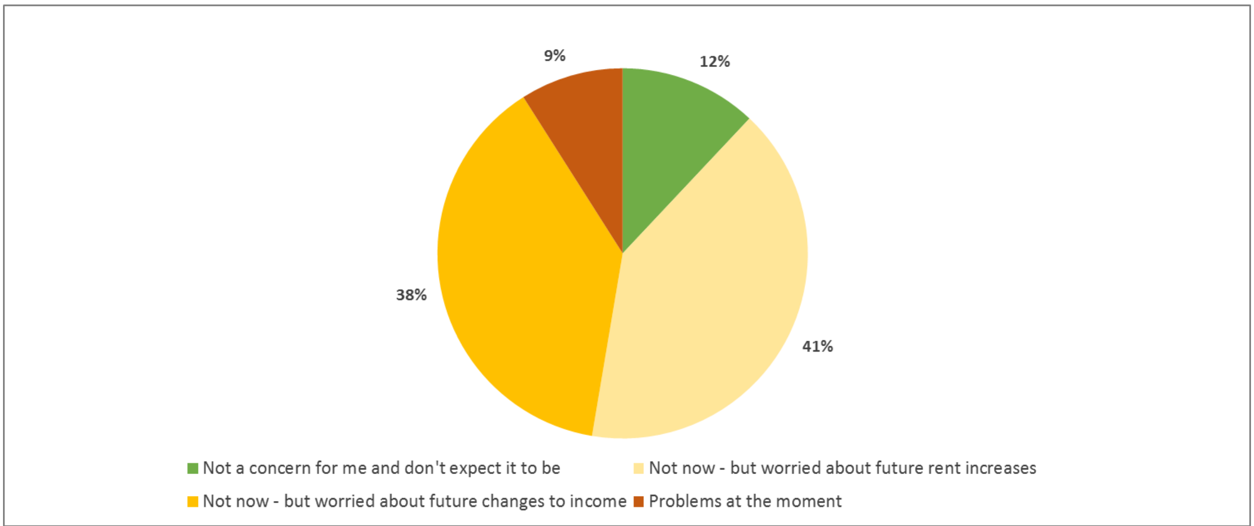
Figure 4: Factors rated as very/fairly important to sense of "value for money" – change over time

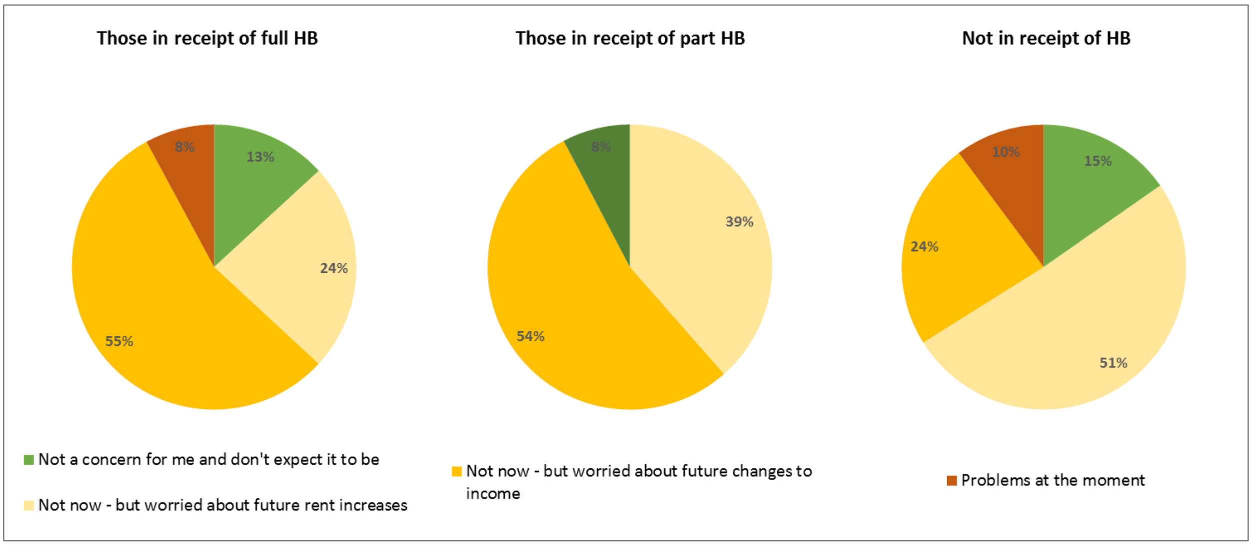


3.6 The survey also asked Panel members the extent to which they are having difficulty affording their rent at the moment. As Figure 5 shows, ***a large majority indicated that they do not have any rent affordability concerns at the moment (91%), but nearly 4 in 5 expressed concerns regarding the possibility of future affordability problems caused by rent increases (41%) or changes to their income (38%)***. This represents an increase on the 2014/15 survey where around two thirds of respondents expressed concerns about future rent affordability. However, there has been a change in question structure for the present survey, with "worried about future changes to income" introduced as an additional option. This may have contributed to the increase in the proportion of respondents reporting concerns – although in-depth discussions also identified some concern amongst participants in relation to future rent increases and affordability.

3.7 Survey results suggest some variation in views on rent affordability dependent on whether households are currently in receipt of Housing Benefit. In particular, those in receipt of full or partial Housing Benefit were more likely than others to express concerns regarding the potential for future changes in their income leading to affordability problems. More than half of those in receipt of Housing Benefit expressed these concerns, compared to around a quarter of those not in receipt of Housing Benefit.

Figure 5: Which of these best describes your views on affordability of your rent?





“Vox Pop” results: rent consultation

3.8 A short “Vox Pop” survey of Panel members in early 2016 sought to gauge members’ recent experience of landlord consultation on annual rent increases – as noted above, a significant factor in perceptions around value for money. This section was also designed to contribute direct feedback from tenants to the SHR thematic on Rent Consultation.

3.9 The Vox Pop uses a combined survey approach which gave Panel members to give their answers via text message or web-survey. This approach, and use of a smaller question set (typically 3-4 questions per exercise), enabled the exercise to use a much shorter fieldwork period, and this to gather feedback quickly on a time-sensitive topic.

3.10 As a result of the shorter fieldwork period and specific focus on text message and web-based participation, response volumes are somewhat lower than for the full Panel survey. However, the level of response received (total of 108 responses) provides a useful picture of Panel members’ experience on rent consultation. The format of the Vox Pop surveys mean that we have more limited information on the profile of participants. However, available data suggests that while the age profile of Vox Pop respondents is somewhat younger than for the Panel as a whole, the 108 responses represent a good cross-section of Panel members.

3.11 ***More than half of respondents had received information from their landlord in the last month about annual rent increases*** – 57% indicated this.[3]

3.12 A little more than a third of respondents had not received information on annual rent increases by the time of the Vox Pop, and the remainder could not recall when they had last received any such information. Most of these respondents indicated that they had received information on annual rent increases in the last year.

3.13 Amongst those who had received information on rent increases recently, ***around half indicated that this gave tenants options for the level of rent increases and opportunities to give feedback***. Half of those who had received information on rent increases indicated that the information did not give tenants any options for the level of rent increase to be introduced.

3.14 ***Most of those who had received information on rent increases felt that this information was clear***. There remained a small proportion (around 1 in 6 of those who had received information) who felt that the information provided “was not clear at all” – these were primarily respondents where the information did not give tenants options on the level of rent increase introduced.

3.15 The Vox Pop exercise also gave Panel members the opportunity to suggest how landlords could better engage with tenants in relation to annual rent increases. Around 1 in 5 of those providing comment here expressed satisfaction with how their landlord currently handles this, and it is notable that most of these comments were from tenants who had

[3] The Vox Pop exercise was timed to coincide with landlords issuing rent increase notices, and hence asked respondents to focus specifically on any notices they had received in the last month.

recently received rent consultation information which asked for their views on different options for the scale of rent increases.

3.16 Other respondents raised a range of specific points relating to a wish to see landlords undertake more, and more meaningful consultation with tenants around rent increases. Again it is notable that some of issues raised appeared to have been influenced by tenants' recent experience of any rent consultation. Specific suggestions were:

- ***Consulting more widely*** with tenants to gather a broader view of rent increases – a particular concern for those who had not recently received information on rent increases. This included reference to examples of specific rent consultation which had included the views of very few tenants, and some concerns around the extent to which landlords focus rent consultation on RTOs and tenant conferences.
- ***Improving approaches to engage more tenants***, including reference to a mix of postal and web-based options, use of clearer and more engaging language in consultation materials, and use of events such as coffee mornings. Respondents also referred to the importance of avoiding holiday periods to provide tenants with sufficient time to participate.
- ***Ensure consultation is more meaningful***. This included reference to the importance of providing tenants with different options for the scale of rent increases (including options for no increase), and consulting with the broad tenant base before a decision has been taken on the preferred rent increase option.
- ***Respond to tenants' feedback*** to explain the decision taken, even where this has not been the most popular option amongst tenants.

In depth discussions

3.17 As set out at section 1 of this report, our work with Panel members this year included a series of discussion groups and telephone interviews to explore views across a range of themes and issues in more depth. These qualitative discussions involved a total of 87 Panel members, and included a specific focus on perceptions of value for money and what drive these, views on the balance between rent levels and services, and affordability of rents. Indeed, discussions this year included a more in-depth exploration these issues around value for money, to build on themes identified through the 2014/15 Panel work programme.

3.18 Consistent with the survey findings set out above, discussions identified a broad range of factors influencing views on value for money and rent affordability. It was clear that views on the most important elements of value and affordability varied from individual to individual. However, a number of key themes emerged and we summarise these over the following pages.

Key drivers of value for money perceptions

Discussions around value for money included repeated reference to the overall quality and responsiveness of landlord services. These participants took a fairly broad view of "service quality" in relation to value for money, and some were reluctant to single out specific services as more important than others. However, it was clear that for most participants the following elements had the greatest bearing on perceptions of value for money:

- Repairs services – particularly emergency services, and repair timescales more generally;
- Quality of home – in terms of standard of build, property type and size, heating/energy efficiency, and suitability/accessibility;
- Standard of improvements and capital investment – this included reference to specific recent improvement works;
- Upkeep and management of local area; and
- (To a lesser extent) how rents compare with other social landlords.

Annual rent increases were also highlighted as a significant factor in value for money, specifically the relationship between annual rent increases, income trends and service quality ("we pay more, but get the same service"). In this context, participants expressed interest in more information on how landlords are using increased rental income to deliver (and improve) services.

Qualitative feedback indicates considerable variation in the extent of tenants' awareness of how their rents compare with those charged by other landlords, with RSL tenants more likely than Council to be aware of this. For those with a clearer sense of how their rents compared, this appeared to have a significant bearing on perceptions of value for money, particularly for a small number of RSL tenants who perceived that other social tenants are paying substantially lower rents for what was seen as a similar property type and standard of service. Participants typically drew these comparisons with other social rented housing options (although some in high value pressured housing market areas did refer to the premium paid by local private tenants), and for RSL tenants this comparison was drawn specifically with other RSLs.

Overall, there appeared to be some appetite for greater transparency around how rents vary across landlords. Several participants highlighted the importance of this kind of transparency in enabling and empowering tenants to make more informed housing decisions. A minority of participants were aware of rental information reported through the SHR's Landlord Reports, but suggested that this should extend beyond average rent levels to enable comparison of equivalent property types and sizes.

Those in receipt of Housing Benefit were typically less focused than other participants on the issue of value for money. However, nearly all tenants saw delivering value for money as a key priority for social landlords, and feedback suggests that receipt of Housing Benefit does not have a significant impact on tenants' views of the main factors driving value for money.

Balance between rent levels and service standards

Participants' views on value for money, and particularly comparability of rents, appeared to be closely linked to the balance between rent levels and the standard of service received. For instance, a number of participants (primarily RSL tenants) offered quite fine-grained views on the varying balance between rents and service standards where they were aware of differences in rent levels across landlords.

This included some reference to a range of specific factors which participants felt could justify a higher rent and/or service charge - and which appeared to be particularly important services for participants' perceptions of value for money. These included quicker repair response times, capital investment programmes (frequency and standard of works), and additional support or advice services (e.g. benefits advice services, assistance securing more competitive house insurance).

However, the great majority of participants indicated that they would not be willing (nor able) to pay more than at present. This included a small number who stated a preference for lower rents which are sufficient to ensure landlords can provide a "basic" service. For the few who may consider higher rent levels, justification for this would be related to improving the speed of repairs, greater investment in tenants' homes, and provision of additional support services – for example tenants appeared more willing to consider higher rents or service charges for concierge services or additional support services.

Affordability of rents

The majority of participants indicated that rent affordability had not been a significant issue for them, nor a major factor in their housing choices. For some this reflected their receipt of full Housing Benefit. However, the majority of participants paying part or full rent indicated that affordability had not been a significant issue for them.

Participants did, however, express some concerns regarding the extent to which affordability may become an issue for them in the future. Consistent with feedback through the survey, these concerns were primarily related to potential change in income through loss of or reduction in benefits, or ongoing rent increases.

A small number of participants reported specific previous examples of affordability -related issues, all related to tenants being affected by the Bedroom Tax. A small number of these participants had moved to smaller properties as a result of these affordability pressures. Participants also passed on anecdotal examples of relatively high rents being a factor in some RSL tenants choosing to move.

4 REPORTING ON LANDLORD PERFORMANCE

4.1 This section considers Panel members' awareness and views on landlord performance reporting. This includes awareness of and interest in their landlord's performance reporting, and the extent to which Panel members have seen any recent change in their landlord's performance. Panel members were also asked about their understanding of and interest in how their landlord operates.

4.2 The findings presented over the following pages draw on Panel survey findings, in-depth feedback through discussion groups and interviews with Panel members, and one of the "Vox Pop" text message and web-based survey exercises.

Key points of note…

Survey results show that the majority of respondents feel well informed about how their landlord is performing. Most had seen information in the last year on their landlord's performance, and respondents generally found this useful.

Survey results also show strong interest in landlord performance information, particularly on the quality of homes, speed of emergency repair response, and annual rent increases. This is consistent with the importance of factors such as quality of home, affordability and speed of repairs response as key drivers of service satisfaction.

A large majority of respondents expressed some degree of interest in how their landlord operates. Interest is strongest in relation to how landlords make sure that they are accountable to tenants, how landlords are run as an organisation, financial management, and service planning and improvement.

Panel members' understanding of how their landlord operates was somewhat mixed, with around a quarter of respondents unclear on areas such as their landlord's financial management and approach to service planning and improvement. A large majority of respondents expressed interest in hearing more about these areas.

For those expressing potential interest in getting more involved in their landlord's governance and scrutiny, this appeared to depend on the purpose or focus of tenant involvement. Several participants stated that they would be more likely to get involved where this was focused on an issue which affected them.

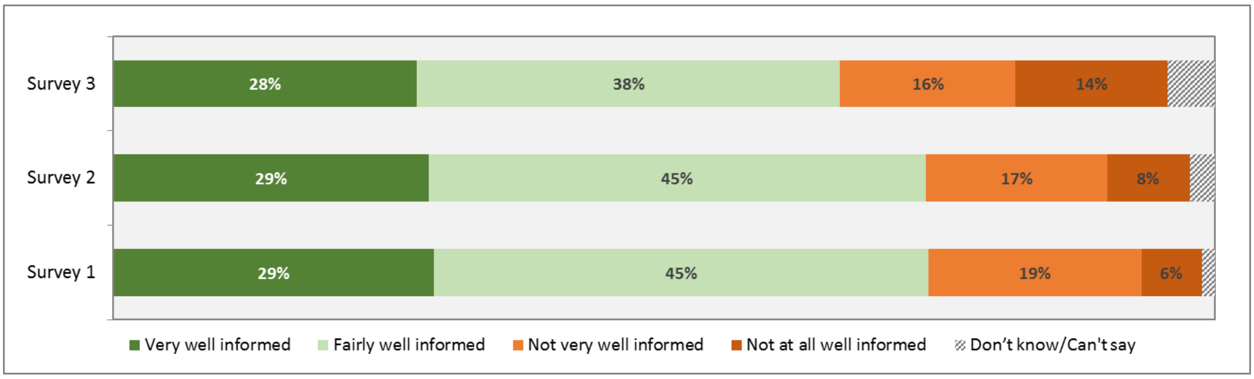
Survey results

Awareness of landlord's performance reporting

4.3 ***Survey results show that the majority of respondents feel well informed about how their landlord is performing.*** Two thirds of respondents indicated this (66%), including 28% who feel "very well informed" about how their landlord is performing. Nevertheless, there remained 30% of respondents who do not feel well informed about how their landlord is performing –this is a 5 percentage point increase on the 2014/15 survey.

4.4 This profile of views was broadly consistent across landlord types. Results from the present survey show a small decrease in the proportion of respondents who feel well informed about how their landlord is performing, but this is not significant.

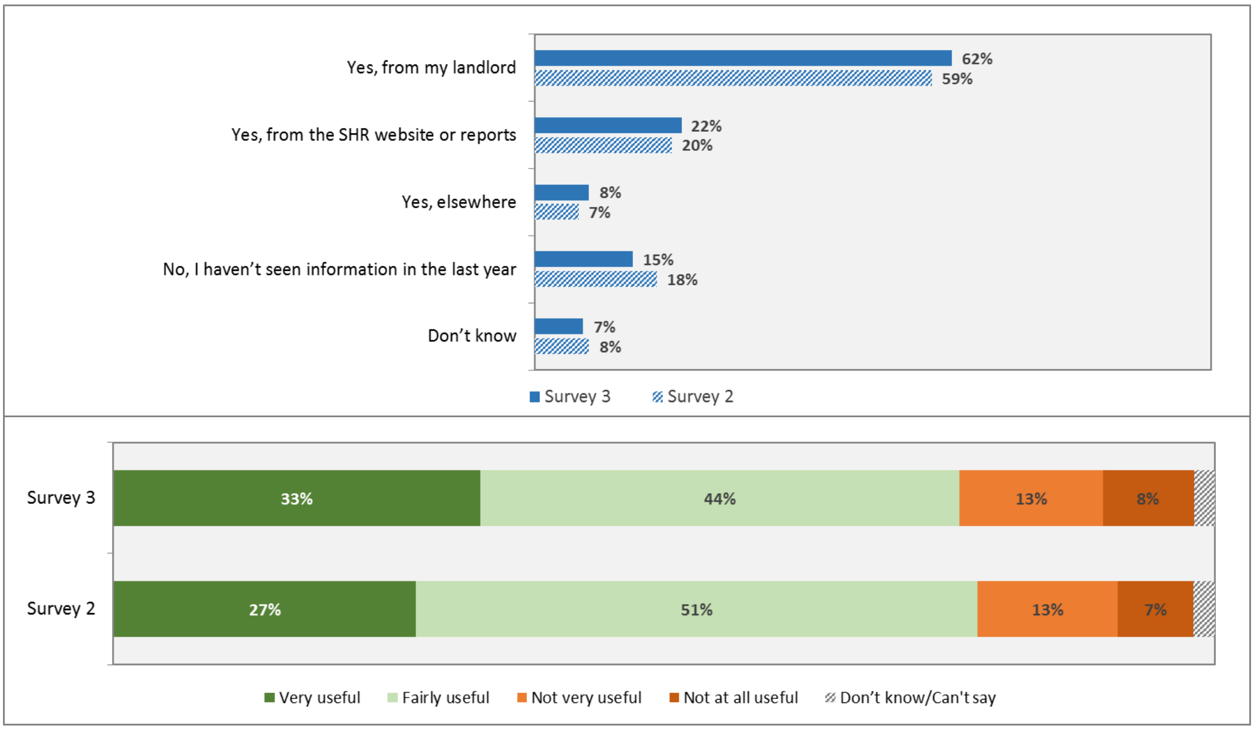
Figure 6: How informed do you feel about how your landlord is performing?



4.5 ***The majority of respondents had seen information in the last year on their landlord's performance***; more than three quarters indicated this (78%), similar to findings from previous Panel surveys. Most of these respondents had seen information produced by their landlord (62% of all respondents), but more than a fifth of all respondents had seen landlord performance information through SHR website or reports (22%).

4.6 ***Most respondents found landlord performance information useful***. Of those who had seen landlord performance information in the last year, 77% found this very or fairly useful. Again this is very similar to findings from previous Panel surveys.

Figure 7: Have you seen information in the last year on your landlord's performance? How useful was this information?

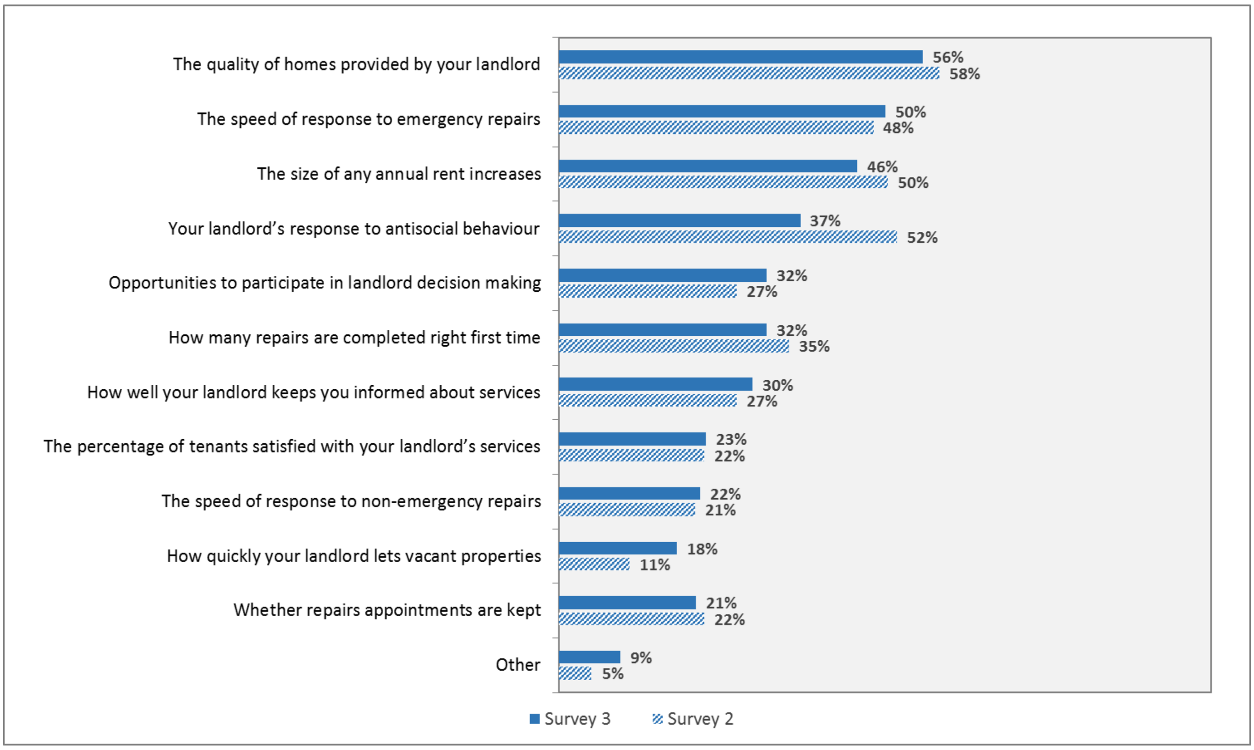


Interest in landlord performance information

4.7 Survey results suggest that ***tenants and service users are most interested in performance information on the quality of homes, speed of response to emergency repairs, and the size of any annual rent increases***. Interest was strongest in relation to the quality of homes (56% expressed interest in this), but around half of respondents showed interest in information on each of speed of response to emergency repairs (50%) and the size of annual rent increases (46%). Survey respondents also showed relatively widespread interest in performance information in landlords' response to antisocial behaviour, although there has been a 15 percentage point reduction in the proportion of respondents expressing interest in this information.

4.8 These results are consistent with respondents' views on what makes for "a satisfied customer" (reported at Figure 1). In particular, quality of home, affordability and speed of response to emergency repairs stand out as the main areas of interest.

Figure 8: Which types of performance information are you most interested in?



Note: respondents were able to select up to 4 types of information.

Perception of landlord's performance over last 2 years

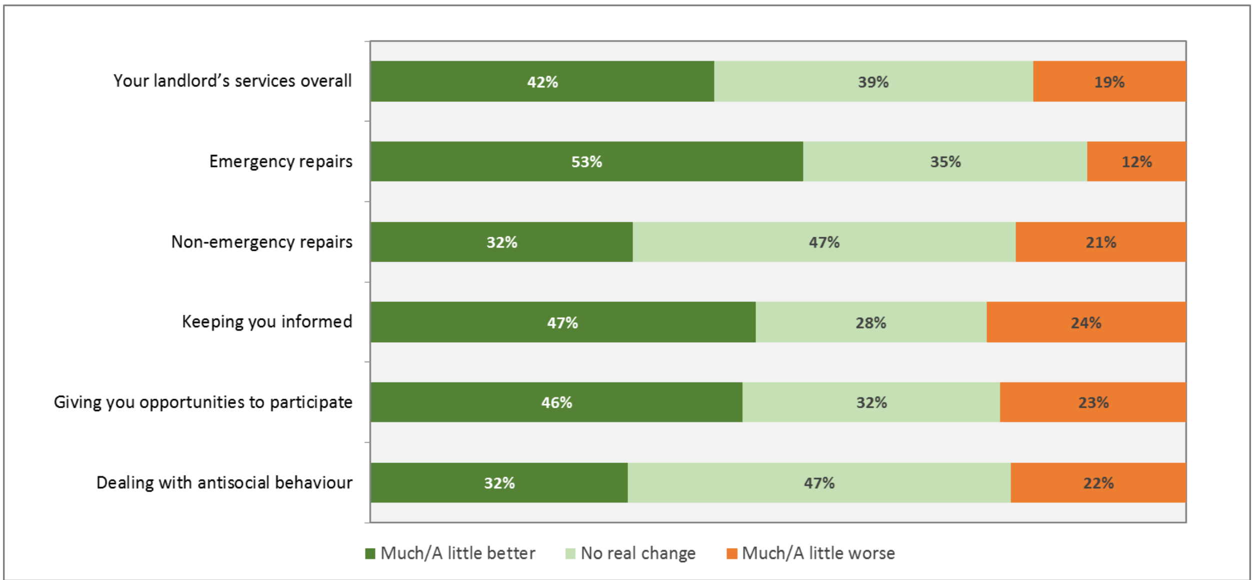
4.9 The survey also asked Panel members about their perception of any change in the quality of their landlord's performance over the last 2 years (Figure 9 over the page).

4.10 ***The majority of respondents suggested that their landlord's performance overall was similar to or better than 2 years ago*** – 42% had seen an improvement in performance. Around a fifth of respondents suggested that their landlord's performance had got worse over the last 2 years (19%).

4.11 Views on any change in the standard of specific landlord services were somewhat varied – while most respondents felt that all services were similar to or better than 2 years ago, the balance of views varied somewhat across specific services:

- Respondents were most positive in their views on emergency repairs, with around half having seen an improvement in the service, and only around 1 in 10 suggesting a reduction in performance.
- Respondents were also generally positive about their landlord keeping tenants informed and providing opportunities to participate – more than 2 in 5 had seen an improvement in these services over the last 2 years.
- Respondents were less likely to have seen an improvement in their landlord's response to non-emergency repairs, and dealing with antisocial behaviour. However, it should be noted that there remained a relatively small minority of respondents who suggested that their landlord's performance had worsened on these services (the largest group had seen no change in services).

Figure 9: Have you seen any change in your landlord's performance over the last 2 years?



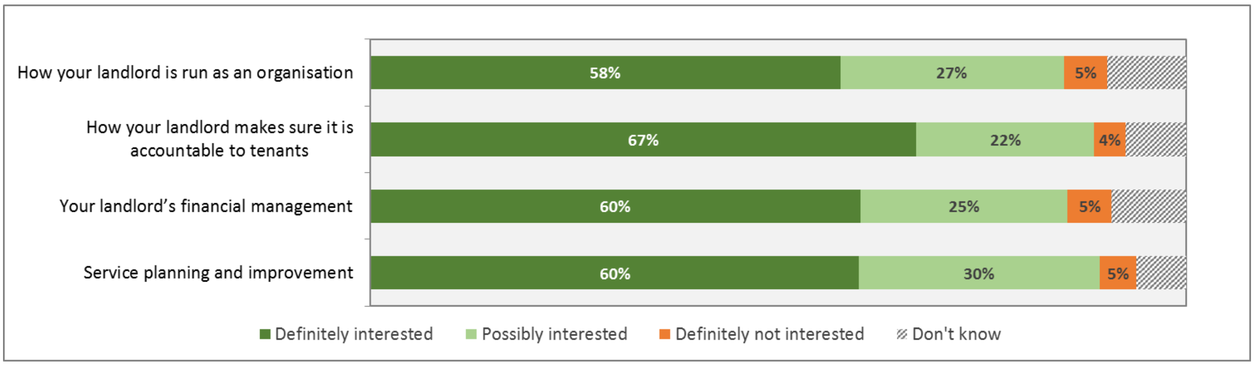
Note: excludes "don't know" responses.

How your landlord operates

4.12 The survey also asked Panel members about their interest in and understanding of how their landlord is run – in terms of landlord governance, and financial management.

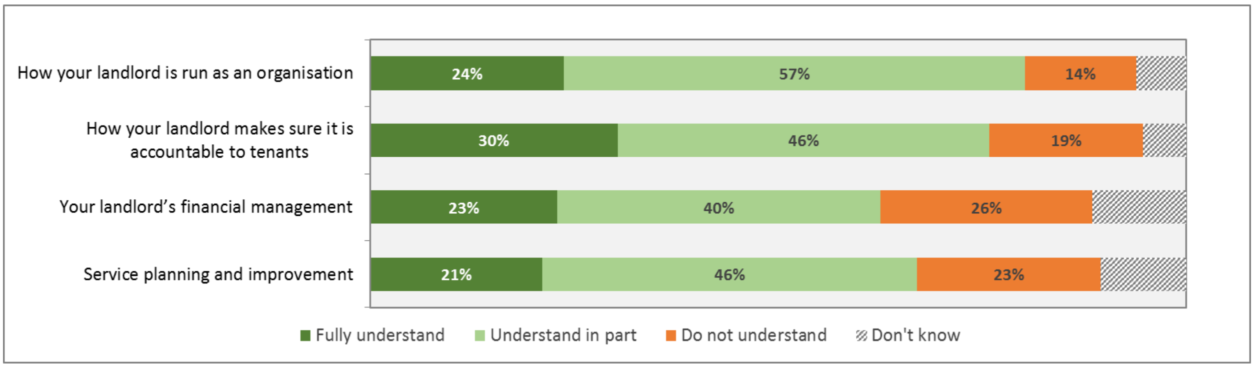
4.13 ***The large majority of respondents expressed some degree of interest in how their landlord operates***, and only around 1 in 20 are not interested in this (Figure 10 over the page). Interest was strongest in relation to how landlords make sure that they are accountable to tenants – two thirds of respondents are "definitely interested" in this (67%). However, survey results also show strong interest in how landlords are run as an organisation, financial management, and service planning and improvement – well over half of respondents are "definitely interested" in each of these.

Figure 10: To what extent are you interested in how your landlord operates?



4.14 ***Panel members' understanding of how their landlord operates was somewhat mixed***. As Figure 11 indicates, most respondents felt that they understood this at least "in part", with understanding strongest in relation to how their landlord is run as an organisation (80% understand to some degree) and is accountable to tenants (76%). However, there remains up to a fifth of respondents who do not understand these aspects of how their landlord is run. Moreover, levels of understanding are lower in relation to landlords' financial management (63% understand, 26% do not understand) and service planning and improvement (67% understand, 23% do not understand)/

Figure 11: To what extent do you feel that you understand how your landlord operates?

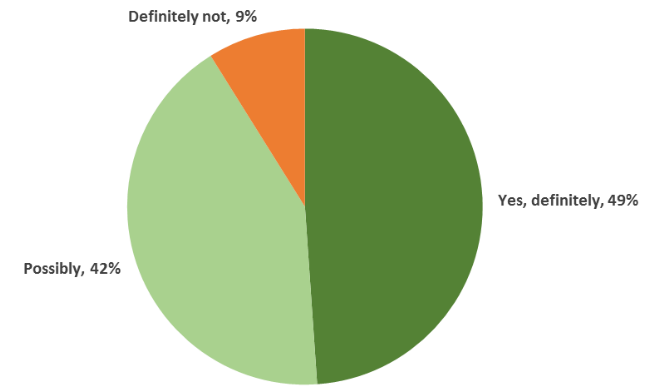


4.15 As Figure 12 (over the page) shows, ***a large majority of respondents would be interested in hearing more about how their landlord operates***. Around 9 in 10 expressed an interest in this information (91%), including half of all respondents who are "definitely" interested (49%). This level of interest was consistent across demographic groups.

4.16 Comments from survey respondents suggest that tenants' interest in how their landlord operates focuses primarily on:

- Financial management, and particularly how rental income is used to improve homes and services for tenants; and
- Decisions taken by landlords, and how tenants were involved in the decision making progress.

Figure 12: Would you be interested in hearing more about how your landlord operates?



In-depth discussions

4.17 The series of discussion groups and telephone interviews with Panel members this year was an opportunity for more in-depth exploration of their views and experiences. These qualitative discussions involved a total of 87 Panel members, and included a specific focus on their landlord keeping service users informed and involved. This focus was based in part on Charter analysis which shows these aspects of landlords' engagement to be closely correlated with overall tenant satisfaction.

4.18 Discussions focused in the main on (i) the importance attached to landlords keeping tenants informed and involved, (ii) views and experiences of landlords keeping tenants informed and tenants getting involved in decision making, and (iii) awareness of and interest in tenant involvement in landlord governance. Key findings from these discussions are set out over the following pages.

Why is it important to keep tenants informed and involved?

Most participants felt that keeping tenants informed about issues affecting them is an important element of landlords' role, and should be "just part of what they do". However, these participants did not appear to feel that landlords should dedicate very significant resources to keeping tenants informed, but rather should ensure that tenants have access to information, if they want it.

Participants were generally more enthusiastic around the importance of tenants being involved in their landlord's decision making. These comments highlighted the value of tenants having a voice, tenants being central to the ongoing viability of their landlord as an organisation, and that tenants can make a significant contribution to improving services. Some also highlighted how enjoyable and interesting they had found their previous involvement in their landlord's decision making.

For some participants, the strength of their interest in getting involved in their landlord's decision making appeared to be related to previous experience of problems or dissatisfaction. This was also consistent with some scepticism around the extent to which the wider tenant population feels that it is important to get involved in decision making. A number of participants cited examples of specific tenant consultation exercises which had seen very low response, and suggested that this was likely to reflect pressures on time, the extent to which tenants are happy with their landlord's performance, and whether tenants pay towards their rent.

The importance of transparency was also mentioned in the context of keeping tenants informed and involved. In relation to landlords keeping tenants informed this was typically focused on performance reporting - "we pay for the service and would like to know what we are getting". Transparency was also referenced in relation to landlords involving tenants in decision making. This included reference to empowering tenants and enabling them to hold their landlords to account, and in doing more to ensure that tenants know about the various ways in which they can get involved.

Keeping tenants informed

Discussions suggested that tenants' interest in their landlord keeping them informed is focused on performance reporting, and how their landlord's performance and rent levels compare with other landlords. This was described by a number of participants as crucial in enabling tenants to make informed judgements about their landlord's services (and in some cases, informed housing choices). One participant drew a parallel here with the role of excellence standards for private sector services (e.g. in the tourism sector).

Most participants felt that their landlord is reasonably good as ensuring tenants have access to the information they need. Reference was made here to a range of approaches including newsletters, leaflets, information in the local press, and email, social media and other web-based reporting. However, some did express concerns regarding landlords' approaches to keeping tenants informed:

- A substantial number of participants raised concerns around the extent to which their landlord's own performance reporting always presents a balanced view of their services.
- Some were also concerned that their landlord's use of language and presentation is not sufficiently engaging, and the potential for a more informal approach to better engage tenants.
- The extent to which landlords use a variety of communication methods to keep tenants informed was also questioned, and some suggested that approaches to keeping tenants informed should be more tailored to tenants' stated communication preferences.

- A small number of factored owners suggested that users of factoring or common repairs service users do not have access to the level of information or opportunities to provide feedback available to tenants.

Enabling tenants to be involved in their landlord's decision making

As was evident in comments on keeping tenants informed, most felt that their landlord provides a number of opportunities for tenants to get involved in decision making. However, some participants questioned whether there was a genuine interest from tenants in getting involved - and there were mixed views on the extent to which landlords could do more to encourage this.

In this context, examples of landlords' approaches mentioned by participants included a mix of standing mechanisms (e.g. committees, strategy groups) and events or exercises with a more specific focus. There was some suggestion that landlords could make greater use of the latter approach. Several participants stated that they would be more likely to get involved where this was focused on an issue which affected them, but were more sceptical around taking membership of a standing groups - "you are either all in or all out, which doesn't seem fair".

A range of positive examples of landlords involving tenants were highlighted:

- Specific positive experience of contributing to tenant scrutiny – including membership of Tenant Panels and strategy planning groups, and involvement in "walkabouts" to provide a tenant perspective on recently completed or planned works.
- Meetings about planned capital investment works, where individuals involved in the design, planning and delivery stages were present to address tenants' queries.
- Approaches which offer tenants multiple response options – including for example by post, online, in person.
- Where landlords communicate the results of participation to all tenants, with a focus on demonstrating the difference that tenants can make - and encouraging more individuals to get involved.

A number of examples of what was seen as poor practice were also highlighted:

- A lack of response from their landlord to tenant engagement exercises or other feedback, contributing to a sense from some participants that their landlord has already made a decision prior to engaging with tenants. This included reference to rent consultations and engagement around maintenance and improvement programmes.
- Consultations or surveys which span major holiday periods (e.g. Christmas, Easter), thus limiting scope for response.
- Systems which involve tenants completing feedback mechanisms in the presence of the workmen on whom feedback is being given.

- Some expressed concerns regarding the extent to which RTOs represent the diversity of tenants' experiences – although others were positive about the contribution made by RTOs.

A potential lack of more local opportunities to participate was also raised by some tenants – particularly for tenants of councils or regional/national RSLs with a broad area of operation.

Governance and financial management

Discussions with research participants highlighted a number of common principles across tenant participation, and which were seen as particularly relevant for tenant involvement in landlords' governance:

- The importance of clarity of purpose for tenants contributing to landlord governance – to engage them in the process in the first instance, and subsequently to ensure they are clear about the role that they are required to play.
- The need for effective support and training for tenants involved in governance – "it is a big ask of tenants". This included those with direct experience who felt that this support and training had been neglected, and who highlighted the detrimental effect on tenants' effectiveness in the role.

Participants had some difficulty distinguishing between tenant consultation, and tenants getting involved in governance. This was most evident when participants were asked about opportunities to get involved in their landlord's governance; most were able to point to opportunities to give their views, but those able to specifically discuss how tenants can contribute to governance were in the minority. This minority includes some active RTO members, alongside other tenants not actively involved in tenant participation structures (who accounted for the majority of participants).

Those able to offer a view on their landlord's governance and financial management were positive about this – and about the opportunities provided for tenant involvement (and action to promote these opportunities). This positive view was tempered by some participants who were less confident about the extent to which tenants can genuinely influence landlord decisions. The most pessimistic participants appeared to feel that this kind of tenant involvement could be a purely "lip service" exercise. A small number of factored owners also noted that they do not have access to opportunities to contribute to their landlord's governance.

A substantial proportion supported greater transparency (on financial management in particular) and tenant involvement, but those expressing a genuine willingness to get more involved were in the minority. Issues such as the specific focus of any tenant involvement, and practical considerations around time availability and travel appeared to be potential barriers.

For some of those expressing an interest in getting more involved, this appeared to depend on the purpose or focus of tenant involvement in governance and scrutiny. Several participants stated that they would be more likely to get involved where this was focused on an issue which affected them.

5 THE SCOTTISH HOUSING REGULATOR

5.1 The final strand of the Panel engagement work sought to gauge Panel members' awareness of SHR's work over the last year, and the extent to which members' views on SHR had changed over this time.

5.2 Given SHR's indirect relationship with tenants and service users, awareness levels around SHR's work are not expected to be comparable to that for social landlord services. Rather, the primary focus in exploring this theme was to gauge any change in awareness over the last year, and to explore Panel members' understanding and perception of SHR's work.

5.3 It should be noted that respondents' status as a National Panel member is likely to have some impact on their awareness of SHR – for example, Panel members may be more likely than other tenants or service users to have come into contact with outputs from SHR's work. Our survey analysis has sought to take this into account as far as possible, for example by looking at how views vary between respondents who have joined in the last year, and longer standing members. This suggests that, while newer members are more likely than others to report an increase in their awareness and understanding of SHR's work in the last year, respondents' length of time as a member does not have a bearing on their opinion of SHR and its work. We highlight in the report text over the following pages where respondents' status as a Panel member should be taken into account when interpreting survey results.

Key points of note…

More than half of survey respondents had seen or heard about SHR's work in the last year. This is an encouraging finding in the context of SHR's indirect relationship with users of social landlord services, and represents an increase from the 2014/15 survey.

More than half of respondents indicated that they understand SHR's role and how this helps service users.

Survey responses suggest a positive trend in awareness of and opinion on the value of SHR and its work. Half of respondents indicated they are more aware of SHR and its work than a year ago, and two fifths have a more positive opinion of SHR than a year ago.

Promotion of more effective tenant scrutiny, and a focus on rent and service charge levels were the two most commonly suggested priority areas for SHR's ongoing work.

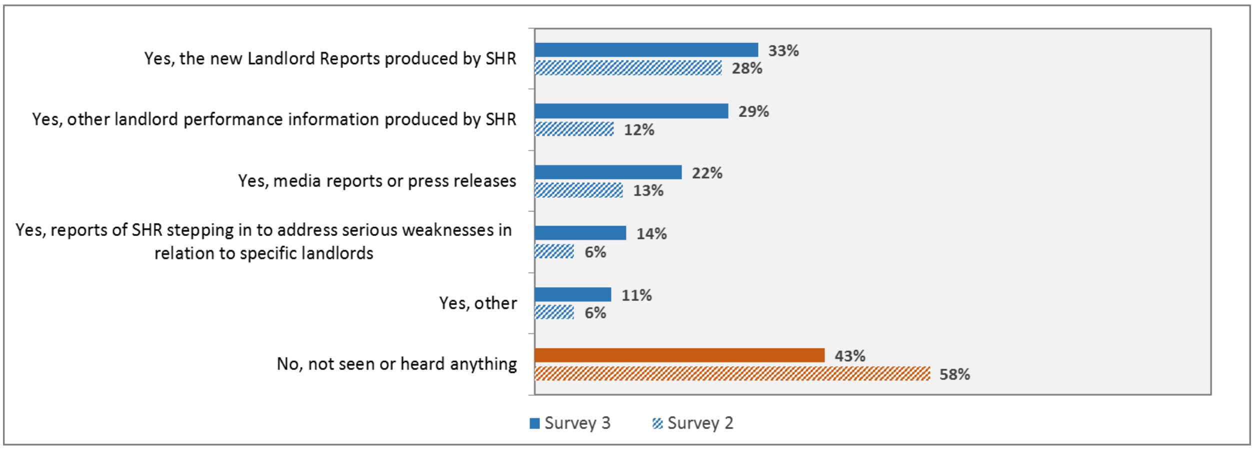
Awareness of SHR activity

5.4 ***More than half of survey respondents had seen or heard about SHR's work in the last year***; 57% of respondents indicated this. Awareness was particularly strong amongst RSL tenants with around 7 in 10 having seen or heard about SHR's work recently.

5.5 This is lower than the large majority of respondents who had seen information in the last year on their own landlord's performance. However, 57% awareness is an encouraging finding in the context of SHR's indirect relationship with tenants, and represents an increase from 42% in the previous survey. This increase in awareness is consistent with SHR's relatively high level of public activity and media profile in the last 1-2 years.

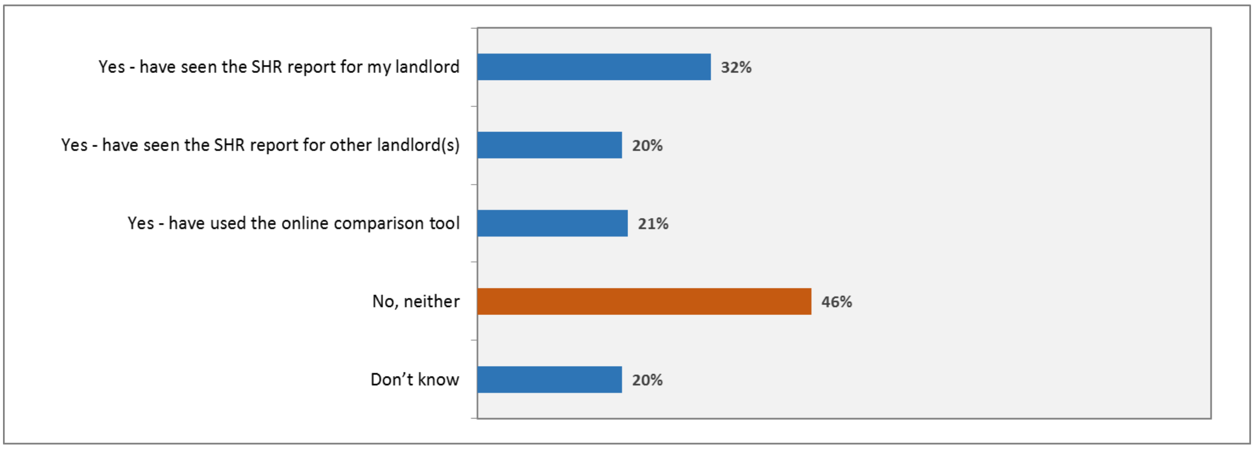
5.6 It is also notable that Panel members were most likely to mention having seen landlord performance information produced by SHR – whether this is SHR's Landlord Reports (33% had seen these) or other information produced by SHR (29%). This suggests that the Landlord Reports, introduced alongside the first year of Social Housing Charter reporting, continue to reach a relatively large number of tenants and service users. Respondents also mentioned having seen media reports or press releases (22%) and reports of SHR addressing serious weaknesses in relation to specific landlords (14%).

Figure 13: Have you seen anything in the last year about SHR's work?



5.7 A little more than a third of respondents had seen specific SHR Landlord Reports and/or had used the online landlord comparison tool. This included 32% of all respondents who had seen SHR Landlord Reports for their landlord, 20% who had reports for other landlords, and 21% had used the online landlord comparison tool. These was significant overlap between these groups.

Figure 14: Have you seen any of SHR's landlord reports and/or used the online comparison tool?

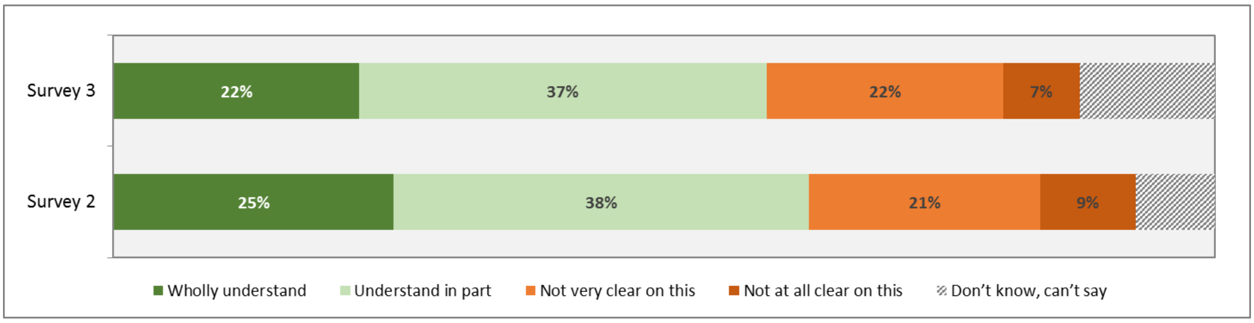


SHR's role and work

5.8 ***More than half of respondents indicated that they understand SHR's role and how this helps service users.*** Around 3 in 5 respondents reported this (59%), although less than a quarter felt that they "wholly understand" this (22%). There remained 3 in 10 respondents who were not clear on SHR's role and how this helps service users (29%). As was evident in relation to awareness of SHR's recent activity, RSL tenants were more likely than Council tenants to understand SHR's role (three quarters of RSL respondents indicated this).

5.9 In the context of SHR's lack of a direct relationship with tenants and service users, this represents relatively strong levels of understanding. However it is important to note that respondents' status as a Panel member is likely to increase their understanding of SHR's role, and as such the findings presented at Figure 15 are likely to overstate the level of understanding across all tenants and service users.

Figure 15: Do you feel you understand SHR's role and how this helps service users?



5.10 ***Survey responses suggest a positive trend in awareness of and opinion on the value of SHR and its work.*** Half of respondents indicated that they were more aware of SHR and its work than a year ago (50%), and two fifths indicated that they were more positive about SHR and its work (40%). This is consistent with respondents' relatively strong awareness of SHR's work in the last year. Around a third of respondents indicated no change in their awareness of SHR (31%) or in their opinion of SHR (34%). However, it is again important to note that respondents' status as a Panel member is likely to increase their awareness of SHR and its work.

Figure 16: Has your awareness of SHR and its work changed over the last year?

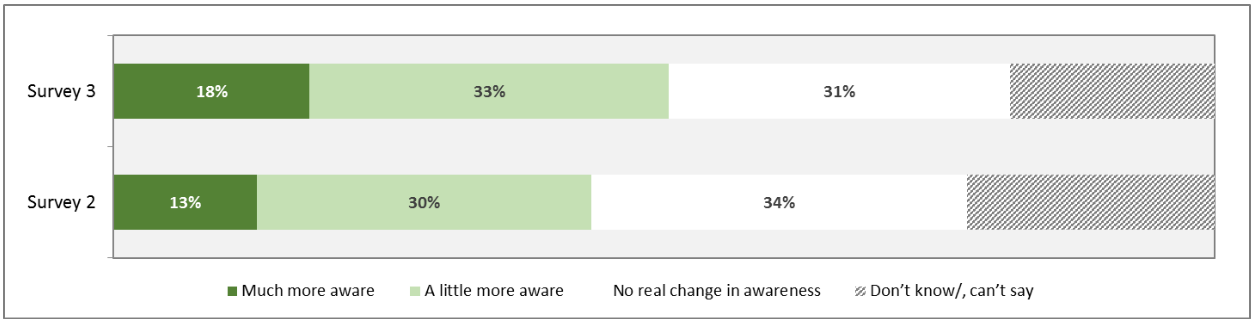
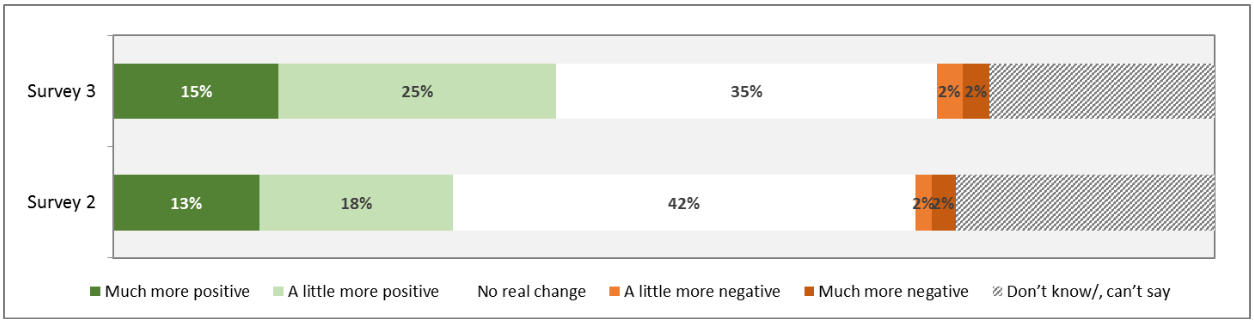


Figure 17: Has your opinion on SHR and its work changed in the last year?



Suggested priorities for SHR

5.11 Finally in relation to the Scottish Housing Regulator, the survey gave Panel members the opportunity to identify the areas which they felt should be a focus for SHR in the context of protecting the interests of tenants and service users. Figure 18 over the page summarises the main suggestions made by survey respondents.

5.12 This shows that promotion of more effective tenant scrutiny, and a focus on rent and service charge levels were the two most commonly suggested areas of focus. The former included reference to ensuring social landlords take action to improve the quality of tenant engagement in their decision making (including extending the reach to include a broader cross-section of tenants), and to ensuring the Regulator makes effective use of tenant input to its regulation activities. Reference to rent levels were particularly focused on concerns regarding the level of annual rent increases, and the potential for these to contribute to affordability difficulties for tenants.

5.13 Survey respondents also raised a range of other issues including a focus on landlords improving the quality and condition of their homes, ensuring tenants have access to meaningful information on landlord performance, and ensuring landlords are taking a sustainable approach to financial management.

Figure 18: Suggested priorities for SHR in protecting interests of tenants and service users?

	Rank
Promoting and supporting more effective tenant scrutiny of landlord operation and decision making	1
A focus on rent/service charge levels, and particularly the level of annual rent increases	2
A focus on the quality and condition of social rented housing stock	3
Continuing reporting of landlord's performance reporting, and encouraging greater transparency around landlords' performance	4
Ensuring the sustainability of landlords' financial management	5
Undertaking "spot checks" or "mystery shopping" of landlords	6
Ensuring that landlords act on tenant complaints	7
Further raising awareness of SHR's work	8

APPENDIX: PANEL MEMBERSHIP

The National Panel was established in spring/summer 2013 as a way for the Scottish Housing Regulator (SHR) to engage with tenants and other users of social landlord services. The National Panel fits into SHR's wider approach to communication and engagement with users of social landlord services, and is used to gauge priorities and experiences – and in this way help to shape SHR's focus in its role as regulator of social landlords.

As a mechanism for gathering the views of tenants and other service users, a significant element of the Panel's value is as an accessible group of engaged individuals willing to participate in consultation exercises. As such the focus for the Panel is on ensuring a good cross-section of tenants and other service users, rather than achieving an exact match to the wider service user population. In this context, some groups such as those in rural areas have been over-sampled to ensure sufficient volume of members to support more focused engagement.

Ensuring a balanced Panel membership is also a key element of our ongoing promotion and recruitment work. This seeks to expand the reach of the Panel in terms of the size of the membership and representation of specific population subgroups.

A total of 57 new members joined the Panel over the course of the last year, through a combination of promotion and recruitment through specific Panel engagement exercises (for example service users taking part in the strand of work on homeless services were given the opportunity to sign up as Panel members). A small number of Panel members have chosen to resign from the Panel over this period, and as a result the overall Panel membership has increased to 481, from 430 at the time of the last Panel report.

The profile of new Panel members secured during the year has resulted in some changes in the overall balance of Panel membership. In particular, the last year has seen small increases in the proportion of those aged under 35, those who have used homeless services, factored owners, those not in receipt of Housing Benefit, and non-RTO members. In the case of homeless services, the number of Panel members using these services has more than doubled in the last year – and is now sufficient to support focused qualitative engagement with these members.

While the Panel's representation of a number of population and service user groups has improved over the last year, the current Panel profile suggests a number of areas where further expanding the Panel membership would improve representation. As noted above, the aim of any further expansion in membership will be on ensuring a sufficient number of members within specific groups, rather than an exact match with the wider population. In this context the current Panel profile suggests recruitment should seek to boost numbers of black and minority ethnic members, and factored owners.

A profile of the current Panel membership is provided over below.

Total current membership	**481**
Age	
Under 35	18%
35-44	16%
45-59	27%
60-74	27%
75+	7%
Unknown	4%
Gender	
Female	49%
Male	51%
Housing Tenure	
Council tenant	52%
RSL tenant	31%
Owner	7%
Gypsy/ Traveller site resident	4%
Unknown	6%
Have used homeless services	
Yes	5%
No	95%
Ethnicity	
White Scottish, British or Irish	90%
White other (inc Scottish Traveller, Gypsy/ Traveller)	6%
Black Minority Ethnic	1%
Unknown	3%
Disability	
1 or more disabilities	35%
No disability	47%
Unknown	19%
Housing Benefit (survey respondents only)	
Full or part Housing Benefit	50%
Not in receipt of Housing Benefit	45%
Prefer not to say	5%
RTO membership	
Member of RTO	22%
Not a member of RTO	78%