Scottish Housing Regulator

National Panel of Tenants and Service Users 2018/19

Thematic Report:
Tenant Participation & Digital Access

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1.   INTRODUCTION

1.1.   This report provides an overview of findings from the 2018/19 programme of National Panel engagement commissioned by the Scottish Housing Regulator.

Background

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

1.3.   The Panel seeks to engage with a good cross-section of tenants and service users. The current membership includes tenants, factored owners, tenants of social rented Gypsy/Traveller sites and people who use homelessness services. A large-scale Panel refreshment exercise over the last year has involved the replacement of more than a third of the existing membership to maintain engagement levels. Recruitment to the Panel is ongoing to ensure that the Panel continues to reflect the views of all key groups of service users. The Panel is widely promoted through several channels to ensure that those not normally involved in engaging with social landlords are represented. For example, more than three quarters of Panel members are not involved in RTOs.

1.4.   Panel membership stands at 425 at the time of reporting, although this number is expected to increase over the coming months as new members continue to join. A profile of the current Panel membership is appended to this report.

The 2018/19 programme

1.5.   The work programme this year was based around several key themes, including:

- tenant participation;
- digital access to services;
- rent affordability;
- Gypsy/Traveller site standards; and
- the experience of people who use homelessness services.

1.6.   Panel engagement across these themes incorporated four main engagement strands:

- A full Panel survey issued to all retained and new Panel members (overall response rate of 60%).
- In-depth telephone interview engagement with Panel members to explore themes emerging through the survey in more detail (total of 41 interviews).
- Interview-based research with homeless service users through visits to homeless service access points and telephone interviews. This included those currently in temporary accommodation (supported and dispersed), and those who had been re-housed through the homeless system. Total of 69 interviews across 8 local authority areas.

- Interview-based research with tenants of social rented Gypsy/Traveller sites through a mix of site visits and telephone interviews. Total of 55 interviews across 10 sites.

1.7. This report integrates quantitative survey results and qualitative findings to provide a rounded view of participants' views and experiences.

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2.   TENANT PARTICIPATION

Key messages

There was widespread awareness of and interest in tenant participation; 84% would like to get more involved. Tenant forums and surveys were the most popular options, but service users want landlords to provide a diversity of opportunities.

Most Panel members have been involved in tenant participation activities. These members referred to a range of benefits including a sense of community, feeling that landlords are listening to tenants, and improved confidence and communication.

Participants expressed frustration where they had not seen results of exercises and/or felt that views had not been taken into account. Some also felt that landlords could do more to ensure exercises include a better cross-section of service users.

2.1.   This section considers Panel members' experience of and interest in tenant participation. Views on the extent to which members are able to influence their landlord's decision making are also explored. Findings bring together survey results and qualitative feedback.

Awareness of participation opportunities

2.2.   A large majority of survey respondents had heard of opportunities to provide feedback to their landlord and influence their landlord's decision making; around 9 in 10 referred to one or more such opportunities.

2.3.   Respondents were most likely to have heard of surveys (59%) and tenant or resident forums (57%). A little less than half of respondents had heard of events for tenants and service users to give feedback (47%), or their landlord's Tenant Scrutiny Panel (44%).

2.4.   There was some variation in awareness across key service user groups. Council tenants are more likely than others to have heard of tenant forums and service user surveys. Those aged 60+ were generally more likely than younger respondents to have heard of participation opportunities.
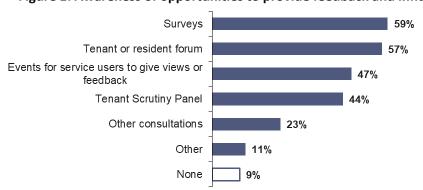
Figure 1: Awareness of opportunities to provide feedback and influence decisions

Involvement in tenant participation

2.5. Around 4 in 5 respondents (79%) indicated that they had been involved in some form of tenant participation. This finding was broadly similar across key service user groups, although participation was somewhat higher for those aged 45+ (80% compared to 70% of under 45s) and those in receipt of Housing Benefit or Universal Credit (86% compared to 76% of others).

2.6. Respondents were most likely to have been involved in service user surveys; more than two thirds (69%) had done so. A substantial proportion of respondents had also been involved in events for tenants and service users (49%), and tenant or resident forums (43%). A third of respondents had been involved in a Tenant Scrutiny Panel.
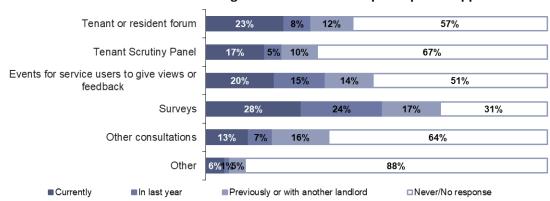
Figure 2: Involvement in participation opportunities

2.7. Written survey responses and interviews sought to explore Panel members' experience of tenant participation in more detail. This included gathering views on landlords' approach to setting up and recruiting participation opportunities, what members got out of their experience of these opportunities, and how landlords responded to tenant input.

2.8. In relation to **setup and administration of tenant participation**, key points were:

- Participants included a mix of those who had heard about opportunities through landlord publications or in offices, and those receiving a direct invite via letter, email or text message.

- A range of positives were raised on the administration of opportunities. These included examples of landlords making opportunities open to all tenants such as via multiple response options (online or written options were appreciated by those who feel uncomfortable or anxious in meetings), ensuring accessibility for those with mobility needs or sensory impairment (including providing transport or covering travel costs), and landlords supporting tenants to establish and maintain representative groups.

- Negatives raised by participants included some who felt that opportunities are not open to all and/or are dominated be a small group of tenants, where locations are difficult to get to (although some noted that this is difficult to avoid in rural areas), where landlords do not cater for working tenants who cannot attend during office hours, where tenants feel that engagement topics are pre-determined and do not allow tenants to raise new issues, and where tenants

feel that their landlord is not genuinely interested in or does not adequately respond to tenant views.

2.9. Participants referred to a range of **ways in which they felt that they had benefitted from participation**. Most obviously this was a hope that their contribution would help to improve services – this was highlighted by nearly all those who had taken part in opportunities. However, feedback also made clear that Panel members had found engagement opportunities enjoyable and interesting. This appeared to be a particular benefit for those who had taken part in in-person engagement. While members were appreciative of opportunities to give feedback via written surveys and feedback cards, those who had been able to take part in more in-depth engagement opportunities emphasised the enjoyment and satisfaction they had gained from this. Specific points raised by participants are noted below.

- Tenants appreciated the opportunity to share their views and to hear from others, with several Panel members referring to a sense of involvement and engagement. Some also felt that their participation had benefitted their confidence and communication skills.

- Most participants felt that participation opportunities showed that their landlord is listening to tenants, and appreciated seeing the results of engagement. Panel members also highlighted where they had received feedback on results, and particularly where landlords had shown how this translated into changes for tenants – although some noted that they had not been able to resolve issues with their own housing.

In their words...

"I feel valued. We always get feedback on what decisions have been made and why."

- Several participants pointed to a better understanding of how their landlord operates generally, and an awareness of specific plans or processes.

- Some expressed frustration where they felt that they had got little out of participation. This included a mix of those taking part via surveys and those attending meetings, and appeared to be related to a view that tenant input was not being taken into account and/or participants were not able to see results. Some had been disappointed with the number of tenants engaging with their landlord, and expressed frustration that a relatively small number of tenants could made decisions for all. Some of those attending tenant forums also suggested that meetings had been dominated by regular attendees such that they felt unable to contribute.

2.10. Views were somewhat mixed on **how landlords had responded to tenant participation**, and appeared to reflect whether tenants felt that their input had contributed to genuine change. Key points raised by participants are summarised below.

- Views were most positive where landlords had acted on tenant feedback. This included reference to specific service improvements being made as a result of tenant participation and scrutiny.

- Participants also referred to feedback being provided to tenants via newsletters and posters, and this was also seen as a key element for landlords' approach to

tenant participation. Those with experience of RTOs or tenant scrutiny also referred to having received direct feedback from landlords on the results of engagement. This feedback typically focused on summarising tenants' responses to engagement exercises, although some also included information on changes being taken forward – and this was highlighted as a positive.

In their words...

"Not great...no feedback. Don't even get reasons they can't take suggestions on board."

- Some expressing frustration where they felt there was little or no response from their landlord, or where they felt that their landlord's response did not adequately address the issues raised by tenants.

2.11. Panel member feedback included a range of **suggestions for changes to landlords' approach to tenant participation**. These are summarised below.

- Providing more support to RTOs, including direct engagement between RTO members and service managers and working with RTOs to improve the diversity of members.

- More meaningful engagement that allows tenants to raise their own issues alongside pre-formulated questions.

- Allowing tenants to have meaningful input to financial decision making.

- Being clearer on the purpose of engagement exercises, and how feedback will influence landlord decision making and service delivery.

- Providing more comprehensive information for rent consultation, including on the implications of alternative rent increases.

- Scheduling tenant engagement to allow enough time for feedback to influence landlord planning and decision making.

- Being more transparent with tenants on how feedback has been used in landlord decision making, including more timely feedback.

Interest in tenant participation

2.12. Survey responses indicate a widespread interest in tenant participation. A large majority indicated that they would like to be more involved in their landlord's decision making (84%), including nearly half who 'strongly agree' with this (48%). However, views are divided on the extent to which tenants can currently influence their landlord's decisions; only 37% feel that they can do so, and 43% feel that they cannot influence decisions.

2.13. There was some variation in these views across key service user groups, particularly in the extent to which respondents feel able to influence their landlord's decisions. This included a substantial difference in views linked to RTO membership; only 30% of those who are not members of an RTO feel able to influence their landlord's decisions, compared to 55% of those involved in RTOs (see Figure 3). Council tenants and those aged 60+ are also more likely to feel that they can influence decisions; 46% of Council tenants (compared to 24% of RSL tenants) and 46% of those aged 60+ (compared to 25% of under 60s).
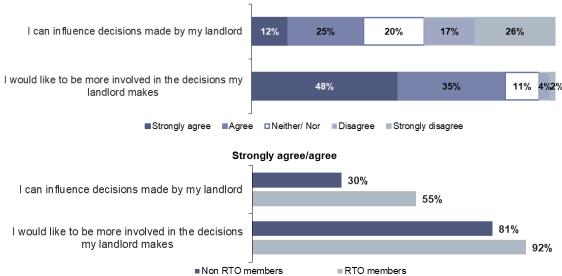
Figure 3: Views on role of tenants in landlord decisions

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither/ Nor	Disagree	Strongly disagree
I can influence decisions made by my landlord	12%	25%	20%	17%	26%
I would like to be more involved in the decisions my landlord makes	48%	35%	11%	4%	2%

Strongly agree/agree

	Non RTO members	RTO members
I can influence decisions made by my landlord	30%	55%
I would like to be more involved in the decisions my landlord makes	81%	92%

2.14. A large majority of respondents would like to get more involved in their landlord's decisions; 84% indicated this. Interest in getting more involved was broadly similar across service user groups, although those aged 45-59 were somewhat more likely than others to express and interest in this.

2.15. Respondents referred to a range of means of doing so, with the most popular being tenant or resident forums (50%), surveys (49%), Tenant Scrutiny Panels (46%) and service user events (44%). Written comments and interviews with Panel members also highlighted suggestions that landlords could be more innovative in the engagement approaches they use, including more use of technology and combining multiple approaches to enable more tenants to take part. Specific suggestions included use of landlord-specific apps and web video communication, tenant-led 'walk rounds', local drop-in surgery sessions or smaller group sessions for tenants who may feel intimidated in larger tenant forum meetings, and more open-ended email or web-based engagement that allows tenants to raise their own issues/make their own suggestions.
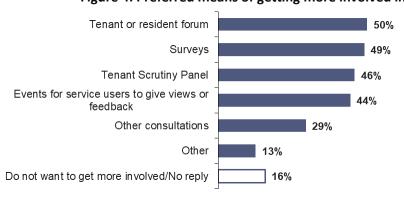
Figure 4: Preferred means of getting more involved in landlord decisions

Tenant or resident forum	50%
Surveys	49%
Tenant Scrutiny Panel	46%
Events for service users to give views or feedback	44%
Other consultations	29%
Other	13%
Do not want to get more involved/No reply	16%

3.   DIGITAL ACCESS TO SERVICES

Key messages

A large majority use the internet, although more than half mentioned factors that discourage this (most common being security and preferring staff contact).

Digital options are the most common ways for Panel members to receive information from their landlord, and are also the most commonly preferred options. However, non-digital options are preferred by a substantial proportion of members.

Key reasons for tenants accessing their landlord via digital options include ease of use, convenience, and tenants' experience using digital access with other services.

Factors that might deter use of digital options include a lack of access to or awareness of digital services, preferring staff contact, and difficulty navigating landlords' websites.

3.1.   This section presents views on digital access to landlord services. This includes access to and use of the internet more generally, and specifically to access landlord and other services. Findings bring together survey results and qualitative feedback.

Use of the internet

3.2.   A large majority (93%) indicated that they have access to the internet at home, and nearly all of these respondents use the internet (98% of those with access). This includes 82% of those with internet access who use it regularly.

3.3.   Consistent with this level of internet use, most respondents feel confident using the internet; 85% indicated this, including 50% who are 'very confident' using the internet. Survey responses indicate that under 45s are generally more confident than older respondents in using the internet, but a large majority of those aged 60+ indicated that they feel confident using the internet (82%).

Figure 5: Confidence using the internet

5% 3%
6%
50%
35%

■Very confident   ■Fairly confident   □Neither/ Nor   ■Not very confident   ■Not at all confident

3.4.   Around 3 in 5 (61%) respondents mentioned factors that discourage them from using the internet. The most common were concerns about online security and privacy (mentioned by 29%) and preferring to do things in person or by phone (28%). In addition, 17% were concerned about inappropriate material on the internet, and 10% are not confident using the internet.

3.5.   For those who are discouraged from using the internet, more services being available online and free internet access were the most common approaches that could encourage them to use the internet more (mentioned by 46% and 43% respectively). These respondents also referred to introductory courses to build confidence (34%) and hands-on assistance with computers and the internet (25%).

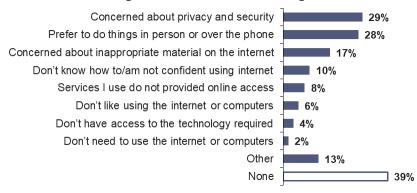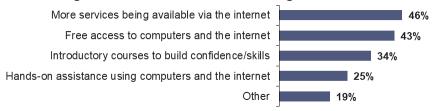**Figure 6: Factors that discourage Panel members from using the internet**

Concerned about privacy and security	29%
Prefer to do things in person or over the phone	28%
Concerned about inappropriate material on the internet	17%
Don't know how to/am not confident using internet	10%
Services I use do not provided online access	8%
Don't like using the internet or computers	6%
Don't have access to the technology required	4%
Don't need to use the internet or computers	2%
Other	13%
None	39%

Figure 7: Factors that would encourage Panel members to use the internet more

More services being available via the internet	46%
Free access to computers and the internet	43%
Introductory courses to build confidence/skills	34%
Hands-on assistance using computers and the internet	25%
Other	19%

3.6.   A large majority of respondents indicated that they had used or would consider using one or more digital communication options to access services or find information; 92% indicated this. This finding was broadly similar across age groups and other service user groups, although RSL tenants were somewhat more likely than Council tenants to have used or to consider using these options.

3.7.   In terms of specific uses of the internet respondents were most likely to have done or to consider using the int3ernet to find information about a service or organisation (87%), to contact a service or organisation (86%), to provide feedback (82%), or to receive updates by email (82%). Respondents were less likely to have done or to consider using the internet to book services (68%).

Figure 8: General use of the internet

Find information online about service/organisation	87%
Contact a service or organisation online	86%
Online shopping	77%
Social media	73%
Apply for or book services online	68%
Provide feedback to a service or organisation	82%
Make a complaint to a service or organisation	79%
Receive updates by email	82%
Receive updates by text message	72%

■Have done   ■Have not done but would consider

Digital access to services

3.8.   Digital options are the most common ways in which respondents currently receive information from their landlord; 4 in 5 (80%) respondents indicated that they currently receive information via email and/or their landlord's website. However, postal options remain relatively commonly used. A little less than half (44%) currently receive information by post and around a quarter (24%) via the local newspaper.

3.9.   Respondents were also asked to identify a single preferred means of receiving information from their landlord. Responses indicate that online options are the most preferred options (56% preferred email or website). However, there remains a substantial proportion who prefer to receive information by post (38%).
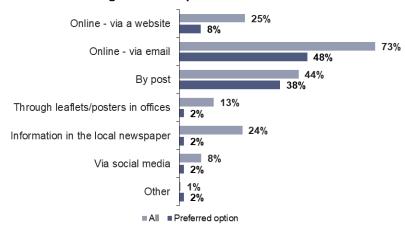
Figure 9: How prefer to receive information from landlord

3.10.   The great majority of respondents access the internet at home; 93% do so when using the internet generally, and 87% usually access the internet from home if they are contacting their landlord in this way. Respondents are most likely to access the internet via computer or laptop; 78% do so, and 57% usually use a computer/laptop when contacting their landlord via the internet. However, a substantial proportion also access the internet via mobile phone (65%) or tablet (42%). This includes 31% who usually use a mobile phone when accessing their landlord via the internet.
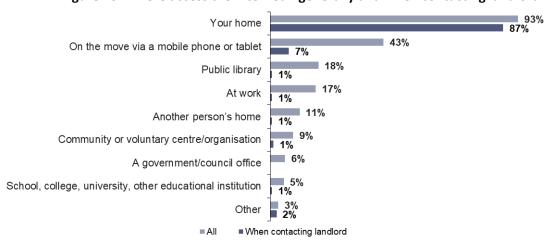
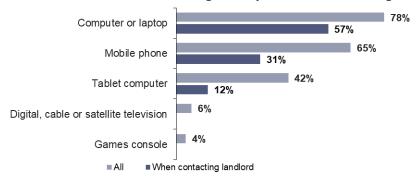**Figure 10: Where access the internet – generally and when contacting landlord**

Figure 11: How access the internet – generally and when contacting landlord

3.11. A large majority of respondents (90%) indicated that they have used or would consider using digital options to contact their landlord. This was broadly similar across service user groups, with the majority of respondents in each key group expressing an interest in using digital options. However, RSL tenants and those aged under 60 were somewhat more likely than others to have used or to consider using these options.

3.12. In terms of specific options, respondents are most likely to have used or to express an interest in finding information online about their landlord (86%) or providing feedback online (82%). Survey results also indicate widespread interest in use of digital options to contact a landlord (78%), make a complaint (77%) or to receive updates by email (77%). Respondents were less likely to have used digital options to apply for or book services, but there remained around two thirds (65%) who had or would consider booking services online.
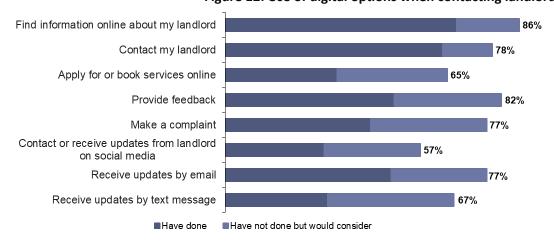
Figure 12: Use of digital options when contacting landlord

3.13. Panel member feedback highlighted a range of **reasons that contribute to their use of digital options** to contact their landlord. These are summarised below.

- Digital options are an easier way to engage with landlord if tenants are looking for information or are not looking for an immediate response. This included some who appreciated landlord websites collating all relevant information for tenants.

- Participants noted that they already digital options such as social media, making this an easy way to keep in touch with their landlord.

- Digital options are more convenient where tenants work shifts and are not able to contact during normal office hours.
- Some prefer to engage with their landlord via email or online to have a record of communication.

3.14. Some participants referred to **factors that deterred them from using digital options** to contact their landlord. These are summarised below.

- The most common reason was tenants not having access to digital services. Some also indicated that they are not comfortable using the internet, avoid using digital options where possible (primarily due to security concerns), and/or do not usually think to use digital options. Some also indicated that they prefer to speak to staff directly when explaining their needs or requesting a service.

In their words…

"The website doesn't have what I need. I want to speak to a real person."

- A small number indicated that they struggle to use digital options due to poor health or sensory impairment.

- Some noted that they had been unaware of the digital options made available by their landlord.

- A small number indicated that their landlord does not make services available digitally.

- Some suggested that they find it difficult to navigate their landlord's website, and felt that their landlord could make digital services easier to find. Some also suggested that landlords could provide better options for tenants to provide feedback via the website.

3.15. Most interviewees referred to **using other digital services and shopping**, including some who indicated that they accessed most of their services digitally. The specific services mentioned by participants included:

- Online banking and bill payments;
- Email and online communication;
- Online shopping and marketplaces;
- Social media;
- Media streaming services and podcasts;
- Booking transport services;
- Finding information on local services;
- Online games; and
- Online education and training.

3.16. Some participants indicated that they do not use any other digital services. These were typically those who do not have access to digital technologies or are uncomfortable using these options, and who therefore do not use digital technologies to contact their landlord.

PANEL MEMBERSHIP

The Panel seeks to engage with a good cross-section of tenants and service users. The current membership includes tenants, factored owners, tenants of social rented Gypsy/Traveller sites and people who use homelessness services. In terms of the wider Panel profile, the focus is on ensuring membership includes representation across all socio-demographic groups, 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 for more focused engagement within these groups.

Ensuring a balanced Panel membership is also a key element of 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 Panel refreshment exercise has been undertaken during 2018 and 2019 to replace the longest-standing members and maintain engagement levels. This has involved replacing more than a third of the total membership through recruitment of 191 new members at the time of reporting. As a result the total membership currently stands at 425, although this number is expected to increase over the coming months as new members continue to join.

The current Panel profile suggests a number of areas where further expanding Panel membership would improve representation. As noted above, the aim of ongoing recruitment and promotion work should 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, factored owners and potential those aged under 35.

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

Current membership	425
Age	
Under 35	14%
35-44	16%
45-59	29%
60-74	29%
75+	10%
Unknown	2%
How would you describe your gender?	
Woman	53%
Man	46%
In another way	1%
Housing Tenure	
Council tenant	41%
RSL tenant	44%
Owner	6%
Gypsy/ Traveller site resident	7%
Unknown	3%
Have used homelessness services	
Yes	4%
No	96%
Ethnicity	
White Scottish, British or Irish	87%
White other (inc Scottish Traveller, Gypsy/ Traveller)	9%
Black Minority Ethnic	2%
Unknown	1%
Disability	
1 or more disabilities	39%
No disability	48%
Unknown	13%
RTO membership	
Member of RTO	24%
Not a member of RTO	76%

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