

Scottish Housing Regulator

National Panel of Tenants and Service Users 2019/20

Report

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CONTENTS

1. INTRODUCTION.....	1
Background.....	1
The 2019/20 programme	1
2. EMPOWERING TENANTS	3
Key attributes for landlords.....	3
Getting in touch with your landlord	4
Your landlord responding to service requests	4
Your landlord engaging with tenants and service users.....	5
Other comments.....	5
Annual Assurance Statements.....	6
3. RENTS AND AFFORDABILITY.....	8
Views on current financial circumstances.....	8
Experience of affordability difficulties.....	9
Views on future financial circumstances.....	11
Heating your home.....	12
4. USERS OF HOMELESSNESS SERVICES	14
Engaging with homelessness services	14
Accessing accommodation.....	16
Accessing settled accommodation	17
Support to sustain a tenancy.....	18
5. TENANTS OF SOCIAL RENTED GYPSY/TRAVELLER SITES	20
Bringing sites up to standard	20
Making a difference for tenants	22
Taking site standards further.....	22
6. FACTORED OWNERS	24
Experience of factoring services.....	24
Contact with the factor	26
Engagement and influencing decisions	27
PANEL MEMBERSHIP	28

1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1. This report provides an overview of findings from the 2019/20 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, and is used to gauge service user priorities and experiences. Panel findings help 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 service users. Members include social tenants, people who have used homelessness services, tenants of social rented Gypsy/Traveller sites and owners using social landlord factoring services. Ongoing recruitment ensures that the membership continues to include a cross-section of members across key service user groups, with more than 200 new members secured during 2019 and 2020. The Panel is also widely promoted to reach those who do not normally engage with social landlords; for example, more than three quarters of Panel members are not involved in RTOs.
- 1.4. Panel membership stands at 462 at the time of reporting. A profile of the current Panel membership is appended to this report.

The 2019/20 programme

- 1.5. The work programme this year was based around the following key themes:
- Empowering tenants;
 - Rent affordability;
 - The experience of people who use homelessness services;
 - Gypsy/Traveller site standards; and
 - The experience of owners using social landlord factoring services.
- 1.6. Panel engagement across these themes incorporated a mix of quantitative and qualitative approaches; a survey issued to all Panel members and in-depth qualitative engagement with Panel members and other users of social landlord services. The Panel survey focused specifically on the themes of empowering tenants and rent affordability, while qualitative engagement was used to consider the experience of people who use homelessness services, Gypsy/Traveller site standards, and owners using factoring services.
- 1.7. Panel survey fieldwork was completed prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the approach to qualitative engagement was adapted in light of social distancing controls introduced to tackle COVID-19. Semi-structured telephone interviews were used for all qualitative engagement, and recruitment of research participants was modified to minimise the burden on landlords impacted by COVID-19. This resulted in a reduced number of participants for qualitative engagement relating to homelessness services and Gypsy/Traveller sites.

- 1.8. In addition to limiting the number of qualitative participants achieved, the modified recruitment approach may also have had an impact on the mix of research participants. For example, in limiting the burden on landlords, a more pragmatic approach was required that engaged with those participants who made themselves available, with limited scope to expand recruitment to ensure a broad cross-section of participants. The National Panel is not intended to provide a wholly representative account of service user views. However, **given the impact of COVID-19 on fieldwork relating to homelessness services and Gypsy/Traveller sites, findings from these works strands should be treated as illustrative.**
- 1.9. This report combines quantitative survey results with qualitative findings based on the following sources:
- Responses to the full Panel survey (54% response, 246 respondents);
 - Interviews with users of homelessness services (total 26 interviewees);
 - Interviews with residents of social rented Gypsy/Traveller sites (total 22 interviewees); and
 - Interviews with owners using social landlord factoring services (total 27 interviewees).
- 1.10. We refer to those taking part in the Panel programme as ‘respondents’ where their participation was via the survey, and ‘participants’ where this was via semi-structured qualitative interview. Direct quotes have been included from qualitative participants to illustrate key points. These comments have been lightly edited for brevity.

2. EMPOWERING TENANTS

Key messages

Landlords were most likely to be seen as ‘professional’, ‘responsible’ and ‘delivers good quality services’.

In relation to tenants getting in touch, landlords were most likely to be seen as ‘accessible’, ‘approachable’ and ‘easy to communicate with’.

When responding to service requests, landlords were most likely to be seen as having staff with the skills and knowledge they need and providing information that meets tenants needs, but were less likely to make tenants feel valued.

In terms of engaging with tenants and service users, landlords were most likely to be seen as providing an accurate account of their performance, but less likely to be seen as open about decision making and taking account of service user views in their decisions.

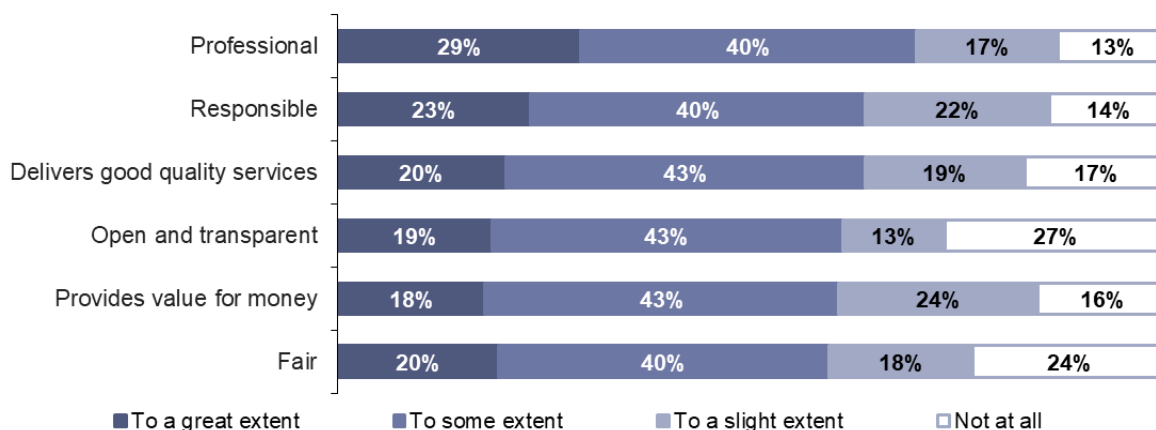
Just under a quarter of respondents had seen information from their landlord about Annual Assurance Statements (23%).

- 2.1. This section considers Panel members’ views on landlord services and the extent to which they represent a range of attributes related to empowering tenants. Members’ awareness of new Annual Assurance Statements is also addressed. Findings are based on Panel survey results.

Key attributes for landlords

- 2.2. Figure 1 summarises respondents’ views on the extent to which their landlord represents a range of attributes. This indicates that landlords were most likely to be seen as ‘professional’. A substantial proportion of respondents also felt that their landlord is ‘responsible’ and ‘delivers good quality services’.
- 2.3. There was some variation in views across key service user groups. In particular, RSL tenants were generally more positive than Council tenants, particularly in relation to their landlord being ‘professional’, ‘open and transparent’, and ‘delivers good quality services’.

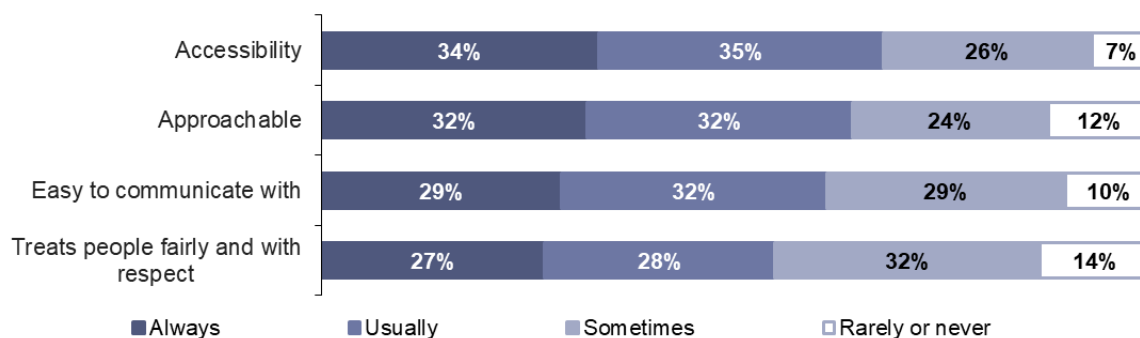
Figure 1: Extent to which landlord represents attributes



Getting in touch with your landlord

- 2.4. Figure 2 summarises respondent views on the extent to which their landlord demonstrates certain values when respondents get in touch.
- 2.5. As this shows, respondents were most positive about the extent to which their landlord is 'accessible' and 'approachable'. However, a substantial proportion of respondents also felt that their landlord is 'easy to communicate with', and 'treats people fairly and with respect'.
- 2.6. There was some variation in views across key service user groups, with RSL tenants more positive than Council tenants in relation to their landlord being easy to communicate with you and treating people fairly and with respect.

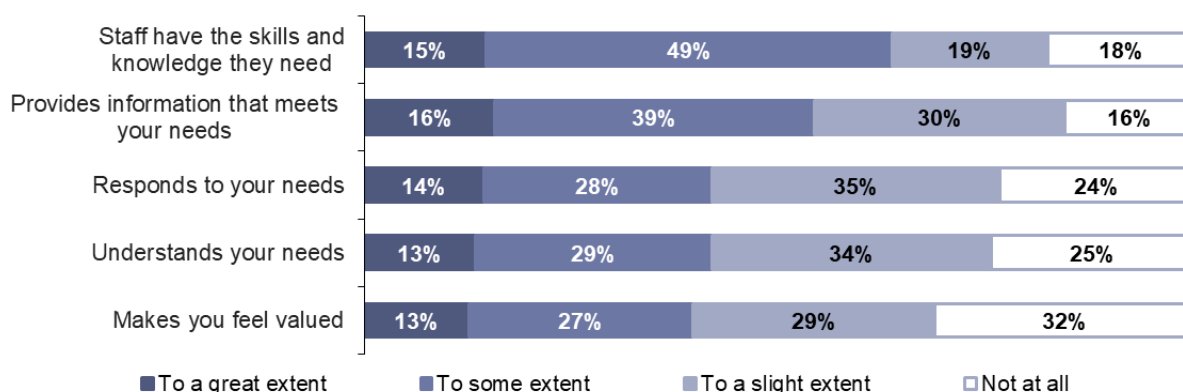
Figure 2: Extent to which landlord demonstrates values when tenants get in touch



Your landlord responding to service requests

- 2.7. Figure 3 summarises respondent views on the extent to which their landlord demonstrates certain values when responding to service requests.
- 2.8. As this shows, respondents were most likely to feel that their landlord's staff have the skills and knowledge they need, and that their landlord provides information that meets their needs. Respondents were less likely to indicate that their landlord makes them feel valued.
- 2.9. There was some variation in views across key service user groups, with RSL tenants more positive than Council tenants in relation to their landlord providing the information that meets their needs, and makes you feel valued.

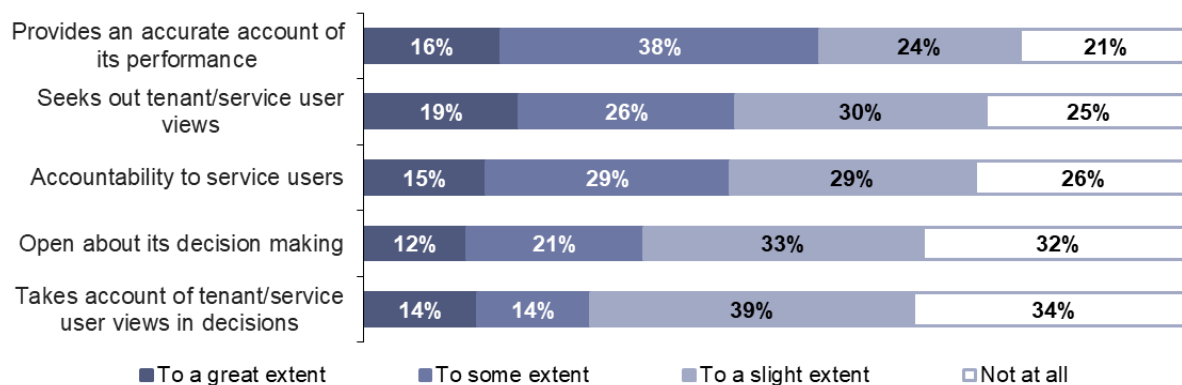
Figure 3: Extent to which landlord demonstrates values when responding to service requests



Your landlord engaging with tenants and service users

- 2.10. Figure 4 summarises respondent views on the extent to which their landlord demonstrates certain values when engaging with tenants and service users.
- 2.11. As this shows, respondents were most positive about their landlord providing an accurate account of its performance. Respondents were less positive about their landlord being open about its decision making, and taking account of tenant/service user views.

Figure 4: Extent to which landlord demonstrates values when engaging with tenants/service users



Other comments

- 2.12. The survey also invited Panel members to provide further written comments on their landlord's approach to service delivery and engagement with tenants and service users.
- 2.13. Around half of all respondents provided written comment here. Reflecting the broadly positive views summarised over the previous pages, some used this opportunity to comment positively on the quality of service provided by their landlord. However, most of those providing comment raised concerns, cited examples of what was seen as poor service, or referred to areas where they felt their landlord could improve. Key points in relation to contacting and requesting services from landlords are summarised below.
- Reference was made to frustration around what was seen as inadequate response from their landlord to specific service requests.
 - It was suggested that improved communication to support service response, or around planned maintenance/improvement could benefit tenants. This included suggestions for SMS notifications for repairs, and communication around planned improvements to enable tenants to "have more of an option of whether they want works done, and some say in what gets changed".
 - There was a perception that service users' experience can vary dependent on individual staff members, particularly for local authorities and other larger landlords. Some felt that their landlord could take a more pro-active focus on customer service standards.
 - It was suggested that some landlords could be more flexible with service users in their application of policies and rules.

- Some frustration was expressed around the level of rent increases in recent years, and suggestions made that landlords do not have structures in place to enable tenants to hold their spending and financial performance to account. In this context, some reflected on whether their landlord's services were still value for money.

2.14. In relation to engaging with tenants and service users, key points were:

- Positive comments were made by respondents who referred to their landlord's consistent use of feedback mechanisms to gather tenants' views on services, and to incorporate tenant views in their decision making.
- Others felt that their landlord could improve the approach to engaging service users, particularly in taking account of service user views in their decision making. This included concerns regarding the representativeness of tenant groups, and the extent to which their landlord's consideration of service user views is based on feedback from a relatively small number of individuals. It was also suggested that landlords could be more transparent in explaining their decisions, and that a lack of transparency contributed to tenants feeling that their views had not been heard.
- It was suggested that landlords should be more accountable to tenants and service users in relation to their service standards and expenditure.

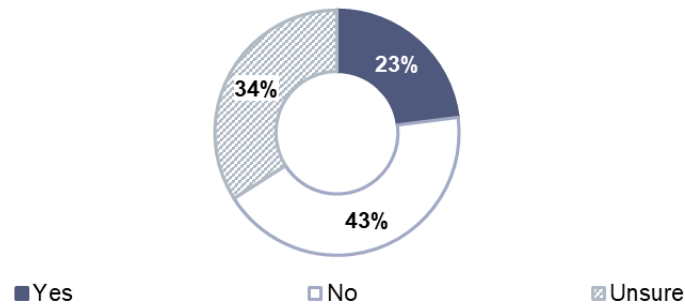
Annual Assurance Statements

2.15. The final survey questions in relation to empowering tenants asked about any information Panel members had received about Annual Assurance Statements. These are a new requirement for social landlords, and provide assurance that the landlord is meeting the standards and requirements set out by the Scottish Housing Regulator.

2.16. As Figure 5 shows, just under a quarter (23%) of respondents had seen information from their landlord about Annual Assurance Statements. A further 43% had not seen any such information, and 34% were unsure. This finding was broadly similar across key respondent groups.

2.17. The minority of respondents who had seen information about Annual Assurance Statements were asked to provide further information this. Examples provided by these respondents included information received direct from their landlord including details of how to access their Annual Assurance Statement (and/or copies via email), copies provided to RTOs, and examples of respondents having found information independently of their landlord. However, some of those providing comment here felt that their landlord could have done more to highlight the purpose of the Annual Assurance Statement for service users.

Figure 5: Whether have seen anything from landlord about Annual Assurance Statements



3. RENTS AND AFFORDABILITY

Key messages

Nearly a third are not managing well financially at present (31%), and the same proportion are not managing well with their housing costs (31%).

Just over a quarter often have to delay or miss paying a bill (28%), and nearly half indicated that money worries have a bad effect on their relationships.

Around half have experienced difficulties affording their rent (51%). Nearly three quarters have experienced difficulties with non-housing bills (74%).

80% were concerned about the future affordability of their rent. These concerns were most commonly related to future rent increases.

Most respondents had experienced difficulty heating their home (62%).

- 3.1. This section considers Panel members' views on rents and affordability. This includes any affordability difficulties specifically in relation to their rent, and views on their financial circumstances more generally.

Views on current financial circumstances

- 3.2. Nearly a third (31%) of respondents indicated that they are not managing well with their finances as a whole, identical to the finding of the 2019 survey. This included a fifth (20%) who are having financial difficulties or are in deep financial trouble.
- 3.3. The same proportion of respondents (31%) indicated that they are not managing well with their current housing costs (including rent, energy bills and other housing-related costs). This represents a 7% increase since the 2019 survey (23% were not managing well with their housing costs in 2019) and included a fifth (20%) who are having financial difficulties or are in deep financial trouble.
- 3.4. Those in receipt of Housing Benefit or Universal Credit were more likely than others to indicate that they are not managing well, both in terms of their general finances and specifically in relation to housing costs. More than a third of those in receipt of benefits indicated that they are not managing well, compared to around a quarter of those not in receipt of benefits. Respondents who 25% or more of their income on rent were most likely to be struggling with their housing costs.

Figure 6: How managing financially at the moment

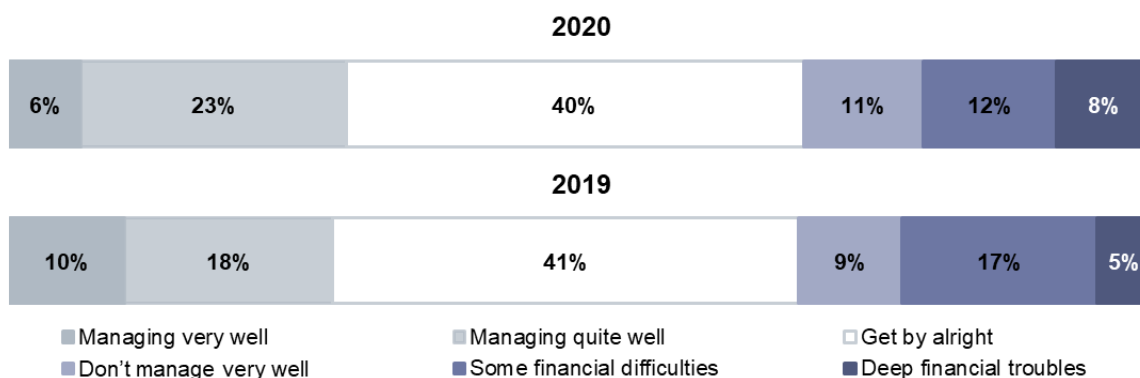
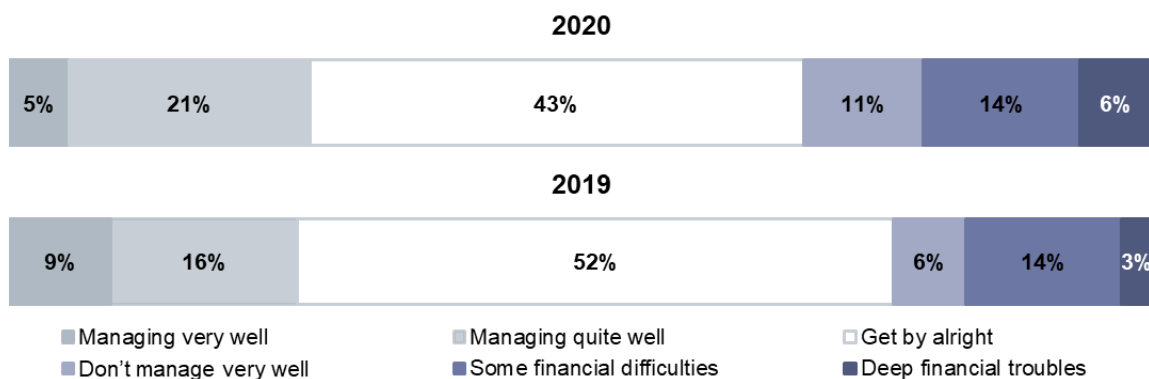
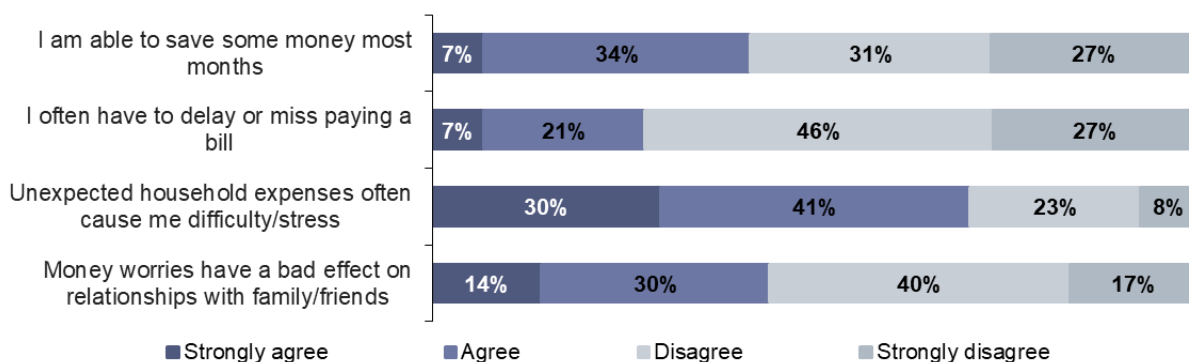


Figure 7: How managing to afford home at the moment

3.5. Figure 8 summarises survey findings in relation to various aspects of respondents' current financial circumstances. Consistent with findings noted above, this indicates that financial worries affect a relatively substantial proportion of respondents:

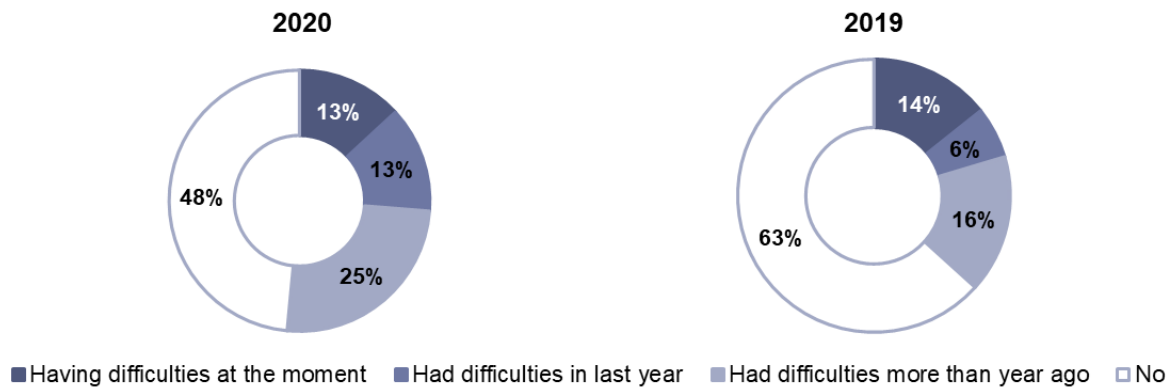
- Just over a quarter (28%) of respondents often have to delay or miss paying a bill;
- More than half (58%) of respondents disagreed that they are able to save money most months;
- Unexpected household expenses often cause difficulty or stress for a large majority (71%) of respondents; and
- Money worries have a bad effect on relationships for nearly half (45%) of respondents.

Figure 8: Financial circumstances at the moment

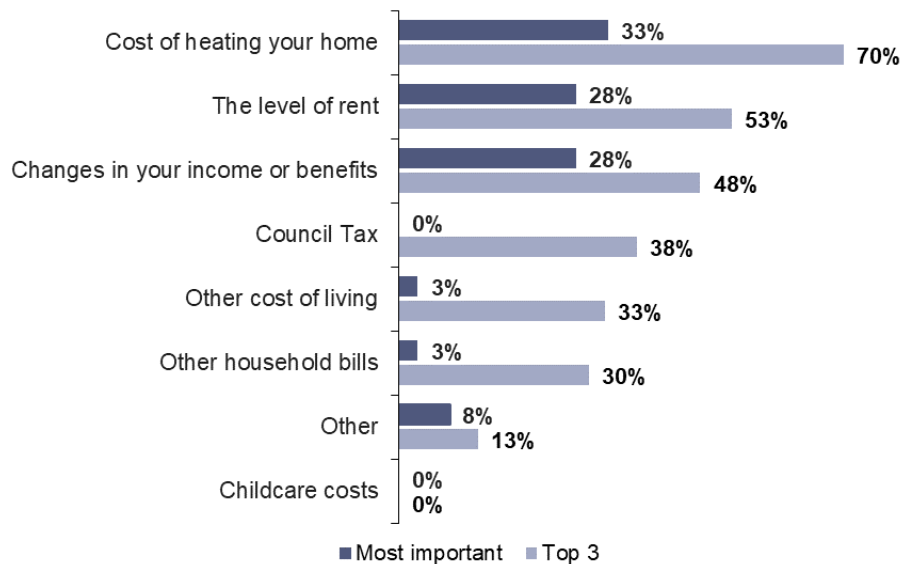
Experience of affordability difficulties

3.6. As Figure 9 shows, around half (51%) of respondents had experienced difficulties affording their rent, including around 1 in 8 (13%) who currently experiencing difficulties. This represents a 14% increase from the 2019 survey, primarily in the proportion of respondents who had previously experienced difficulties.

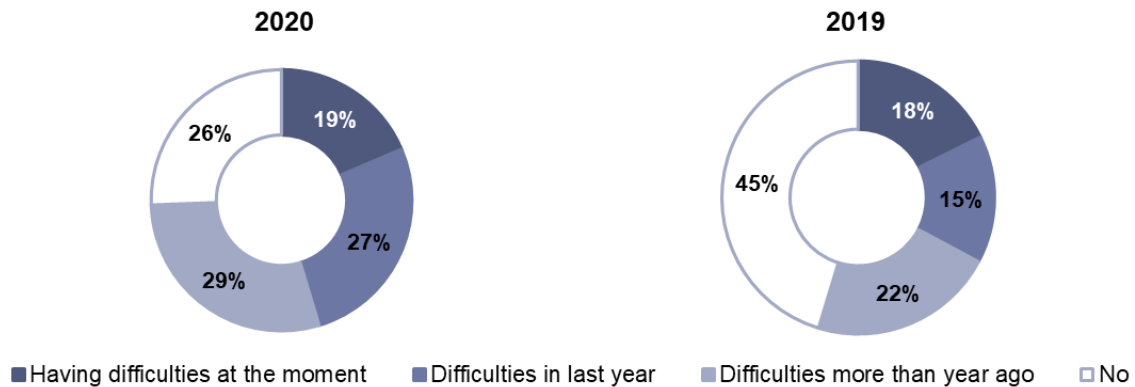
3.7. Survey results also show some variation in experience of rent affordability linked to whether tenants receive help with their rent, and the proportion of income that tenants spend on their rent. In particular, those who do not receive Housing Benefit or Universal Credit towards their rent, and those who spend 25% or more of their income on rent are most likely to experience difficulties.

Figure 9: Whether experienced difficulty affording rent

3.8. As Figure 10 shows, heating costs were the most commonly cited factor for respondents having difficulty affording their rent (mentioned by 70%, and the most important factor for 33%). Other commonly mentioned factors were the level of rent (mentioned by 53%) and changes to income or benefits (48%).

Figure 10: Factors contributing to difficulty affording rent

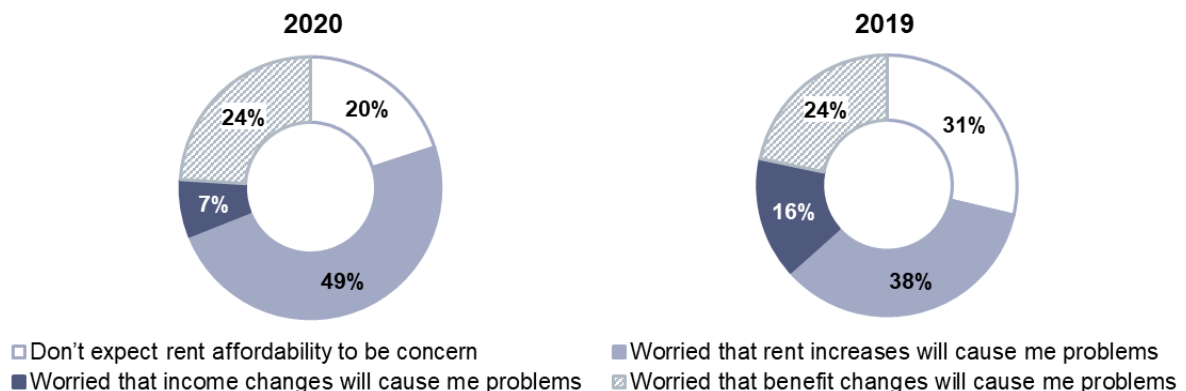
3.9. Nearly three quarters of respondents (74%) indicated that they had experienced difficulties with other, non-housing costs, including 45% who had experienced difficulties in the last year. This represents a 19% increase since the 2019 survey (55% reported having experienced difficulty affording non-housing bills). Consistent with findings in relation to housing, difficulties with non-housing bills appear to be most prevalent for those in receipt of Housing Benefit or Universal Credit, those who spend 25% or more of their income on rent.

Figure 11: Whether experienced difficulty affording non-housing bills

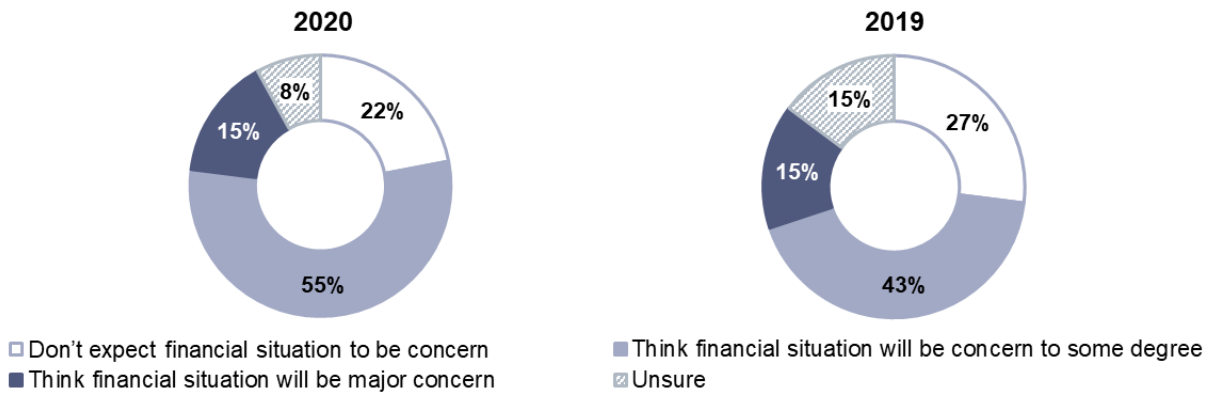
Views on future financial circumstances

3.10. The survey also asked for views on Panel members' future financial circumstances. As Figure 12 shows, 80% of respondents expressed concerns about affording their rent over the next few years. This represents an 11% increase since the 2019 survey (69% expressed concerns). Perhaps unsurprisingly, those who had experienced rent affordability problems were significantly more likely to express concerns about the future (89%, compared to 27% of those who had not experienced difficulties).

3.11. Concerns about future affordability were most commonly related to rent increases; 49% expressed concerns about the impact of future rent increases on the affordability of their rent. Around a quarter (24%) of respondents were concerned about the impact of future benefit changes, and less than a tenth (7%) were concerned about the impact of future changes to their income.

Figure 12: Whether concerned about affording rent over next few years

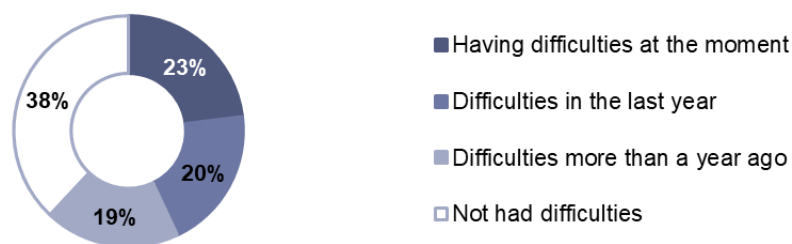
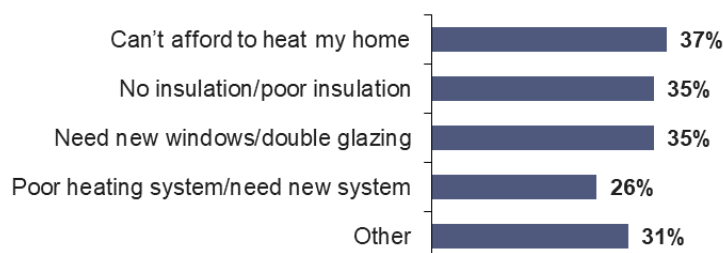
3.12. A large majority (70%) of respondents expressed some concern about their future financial circumstances more generally, including 15% for whom their future financial situation was a major concern. This represents a 12% increase since the 2019 survey (58% expressed concerns about their future financial circumstances).

Figure 13: Whether concerned about finances over next few years

Heating your home

3.13. A majority (62%) of respondents had experienced difficulty heating their home, including nearly a quarter (23%) who were having difficulties currently. This is broadly similar to findings of the 2019 survey (57% had experienced difficulties). Perhaps unsurprisingly, those who had also experienced difficulties affording their rent were more likely to have had difficulty heating their home (82% compared with 26% of those who have not had difficulty affording their rent).

3.14. As Figure 15 shows, respondents referred to a range of factors as having contributed to difficulties heating their home. These included heating costs (mentioned by 37%), poor insulation (35%) and needing new windows (35%). A number of respondents provided further written comment on the difficulties they had experienced heating their home. These focused primarily on poor insulation and problems with or a lack of double glazing, but also included some referring to their financial circumstances making it difficult to heat their home.

Figure 14: Whether had difficulty heating home**Figure 15: Factors contributing to difficulty heating home**

- 3.15. A quarter (25%) of respondents indicated that their landlord had made energy efficiency improvements to their home in the last 2 years. This included: installation of new boilers and/or heating systems; installation of double glazing; new doors; replacement or additional insulation to cavity walls, exterior and/or loft; and installation of renewable energy generation technology.
- 3.16. Nearly two thirds of those who had energy efficiency improvements made to their home indicated that they had seen a reduction in their heating costs as a result. This included a fifth who had seen a 'big reduction' in heating costs.

4. USERS OF HOMELESSNESS SERVICES

Key messages

Participants had accessed services from differing circumstances, and this was reflected in their needs when accessing homelessness services.

Access to alternative accommodation had a significant bearing on experience of services – for some of those requiring emergency accommodation, feedback was focused exclusively on whether services had found suitable accommodation.

Some participants highlighted their emotional needs at the time of accessing services, in addition to their requirement for accommodation. This appeared to be a particular concern for those without prior experience of homelessness services.

Participants generally felt that the temporary accommodation provided met their needs, albeit some required multiple moves to find a suitable option.

Participants' transition to settled accommodation was a key stage in terms of their subsequently sustaining a tenancy. Participants referred to this as a significant relief and a clearly positive step, but also as bringing practical and emotional challenges.

The role of support from service staff and informal support networks was highlighted in relation to participants' initial engagement with services, their time in temporary accommodation, and sustaining their own tenancy. Some felt that more emotional support was required as they settled into their accommodation.

- 4.1. Engagement with people who have used homelessness services focused on their experience of engaging with services, any experience of rough sleeping and the services that had helped them to move on from this, and experiences of accessing and sustaining a tenancy of their own. Findings are based on qualitative telephone interviews, incorporating interviews with 26 households with experience of homelessness services across 6 local authority areas.
- 4.2. As is noted in section 1 of this report, the approach to engagement with users of homelessness services was adapted in light of social distancing controls introduced to tackle COVID-19, to avoid any in-person engagement with households. This has had an impact on the profile of participants; for example it has not been possible to represent experience of rough sleeping to the extent that had been anticipated. **As such, findings presented over the following pages should be treated as illustrative.**

Engaging with homelessness services

- 4.3. Qualitative findings in relation to individuals' engagement with homelessness services made clear the extent to which this was affected by their specific needs. Participants had accessed services from differing circumstances, and with a diverse range of requirements. This included following relationship breakdown, having lost their previous tenancy, and some leaving the family home for the first time. Moreover, participants described a range of specific needs and circumstances including single households and those with children of varying ages, late-term pregnancies, health conditions and addiction issues.

- 4.4. Most participants indicated that there had been a substantial period since they had last been in settled accommodation. This included examples of households having moved between multiple insecure circumstances (e.g. 'sofa surfing' between friends and family), while others had remained with a family member for as long as possible. Those who had remained in the same insecure circumstances for a longer period typically indicated that they had been able to approach services in a more planned way, but most made clear that they had in effect come to a 'crisis point'.
- 4.5. The diversity of participants' circumstances was reflected in their needs when accessing homelessness services, and in particular the extent to which they required immediate accommodation. Qualitative findings suggest that participants' experience of engaging with services, and the aspects of this experience that mattered most to them, were linked with their access to alternative accommodation. For example, those who could remain in their current accommodation for a period of time felt able to wait for more suitable temporary accommodation. These participants typically focused more on the manner of service staff and the extent to which they developed an understanding of their needs, when describing their experience of homelessness services.
- 4.6. For those who required emergency accommodation, their experience appeared to be focused much more on whether services had been able to find suitable accommodation. This focus on "getting a roof over my head" was also reflected in their views on the quality of accommodation, discussed later in this section. Those requiring emergency accommodation were generally less likely to refer to the quality of accommodation (although some did cite examples of having been placed in inappropriate circumstances), and more willing to accept moves between temporary accommodation if this secured a better outcome for them.
- 4.7. Some participants also highlighted their emotional needs at the time of accessing services, in addition to their requirement for accommodation. This was particularly the case for those accessing services following a relationship breakdown or leaving the family home for the first time. These participants described their anxiety, and in some cases shame, around the process of accessing homelessness services. This appeared to be a particular issue for participants without prior experience of homelessness services. In addition to the emotional distress associated with their circumstances, these participants recounted significant anxiety regarding key questions such as whether they would be entitled to accommodation, and the type of accommodation likely to be available.
- 4.8. Participants' experiences around their engagement with homelessness services highlighted the importance of service staff and other sources of support. This was referenced by participants in terms of staff having developed a genuine understanding of their needs, and in accessing emergency accommodation. However, participants also commented on the importance of service staff in reassuring them that their circumstances could be improved, and taking the time to ease their anxiety. This included providing clarity on households' entitlement to accommodation, and engagement with support workers.
- 4.9. Some participants also highlighted the value of independent advocacy to help households in negotiating services, and saw a need for improved access to advocacy services. These participants suggested that homeless households are often anxious, and can be unwilling to 'push back' against any delays or difficulties encountered. The

value of advocacy was also highlighted by participants who felt that their experience of homelessness services had benefited significantly from family members or others acting on their behalf. As noted later in this section, this included some who felt that advocacy had helped them to access settled accommodation more quickly.

Accessing accommodation

- 4.10. Participants generally indicated that they had been able to access temporary accommodation within the time they expected. This was the case both for those requiring emergency accommodation, and those able to wait for a short period before requiring temporary accommodation.
- 4.11. Feedback from those who had waited for a short period before requiring temporary accommodation was positive in relation to services developing an understanding of their needs, and using this time to secure more appropriate accommodation. As noted later in this section, this included some who highlighted the importance of access to suitable temporary accommodation for their wellbeing while waiting for settled accommodation. However, a small number expressed concern that agreeing to wait for suitable temporary accommodation had led to their remaining in their current accommodation for longer than was sustainable.
- 4.12. For those requiring emergency accommodation, rapid access to accommodation was their over-riding concern when describing their initial experience of homelessness services. Nearly all participants in these circumstances gave positive feedback on services securing emergency accommodation for them. Those providing less positive feedback raised concerns regarding the quality and location of accommodation secured, although these respondents indicated that more suitable accommodation had been identified in response to their concerns.
- 4.13. Participants generally felt that the temporary accommodation provided met their needs, and that the quality and location of accommodation had been adequate as a temporary option enabling them to wait for a tenancy of their own.
- 4.14. However, some indicated that they had moved between multiple options to find suitable temporary accommodation. This appeared to be a particular issue for those who required emergency accommodation at the point of presenting as homeless; several participants had spent a short period in less suitable accommodation until a better temporary option was found. However, others also referred to having been required to spend a substantial period of time in temporary accommodation that they felt did not suit their needs.
- 4.15. In terms of specific issues raised in relation to participants' time in temporary accommodation, the most significant were:
- Examples of temporary accommodation in need of repair and/or redecoration, including participants with children having to spend a period of time in accommodation without suitable flooring.
 - Location of accommodation being too far from support networks and schooling. Some reported lengthy and costly journeys to access school and family or friends. This contributed to some participants indicating that they had felt isolated and lonely during some of their time in temporary accommodation – particularly for those adjusting to living independently for the first time.

- Poor quality local environment, including some expressing concerns regarding the safety of their children in the local area.
- Difficulties adjusting to shared accommodation including noise and a perceived lack of independence, feeling uncomfortable with use of CCTV, and difficulty finding quiet personal space. This appeared to be a particular concern for households with children placed in hotel accommodation.
- Comments highlighting the importance of attitude of staff in hotel or B&B accommodation, including a mix of positive and negative experiences.

- 4.16. Qualitative findings made clear that the suitability of temporary accommodation could have a significant impact on their mental health. Participants pointed to several positive aspects of their time in temporary accommodation, most notably communication from homelessness services and access to support staff. However, these were seen as having only a limited positive impact for those required to stay in temporary accommodation which they felt did not meet their needs. These participants referred to loneliness, a lack of freedom or independence (primarily for those staying in units with controls on visitor numbers and times, and CCTV), and in some cases “a real sense of shame” felt by those staying in some homeless units.
- 4.17. Several participants also referred to the uncertainty experienced by those staying in emergency accommodation where they could be asked to move at any time. This had been a particular challenge for families with children. While these participants had typically remained in emergency accommodation for only a short period, this was seen by some as the most difficult aspect of their experience of the service.
- 4.18. For these participants, speed of access to settled accommodation had been their overwhelming concern. In contrast, others had spent significant periods of time in temporary accommodation and appeared to be much less concerned with speed to access to settled accommodation, if the temporary accommodation had met their needs. This included some who suggested that a period in temporary accommodation benefited them as a “stepping stone” to a tenancy of their own, and may have contributed to them sustaining their tenancy.
- 4.19. As noted above, participants highlighted the role of support from service staff and informal support networks in relation to their time in temporary accommodation. Some referred to practical support from staff around benefits entitlement and general financial management, and from family and friends in relation to access to transport and developing household skills for those living independently for the first time. Participants also highlighted the role of emotional support in maintaining their mental and physical wellbeing. This included from support staff where participants felt they had developed a positive relationship, and from family and friends (highlighting the importance of the location of temporary accommodation).

Accessing settled accommodation

- 4.20. Some participants indicated that they had been unclear on how long they may be required to wait to access their own tenancy, and commented on their move to settled accommodation having “come out of the blue” after what may have been a prolonged period in temporary accommodation. However, participants generally felt that they had not been required to wait longer than had been expected to access settled accommodation. Moreover, some suggested that they had been able to access

accommodation more quickly than they expected, including a small number with prior experience of homelessness services who felt that their stay in temporary accommodation had been shorter than previously.

- 4.21. While most appeared to feel that they had been able to access settled accommodation within a reasonable period, a small number of participants recounted difficulties such as missing paperwork or proving residency as adding considerable time to the process of accessing a tenancy. Access to appropriate advocacy support was highlighted as particularly valuable in minimising the impact of these issues.
- 4.22. Participants referred to regular contact with service staff as being important while waiting to access their own tenancy. This included specific reference to staff having kept participants up to date on the progress of their application, but also a more general point that this ongoing contact with the service reassured them that they “had not been forgotten”. A small number of participants also felt that maintaining contact with service staff had helped to shorten their wait for settled accommodation. This included examples of staff working with participants to secure necessary documentation, and of having updated service staff on changes in circumstances which increased their priority. Participants highlighted the particular value of a consistent point of contact in helping them to negotiate the system, and potentially to reduce the time taken to access settled accommodation.
- 4.23. Qualitative findings highlighted the importance of households’ transition to settled accommodation. A number of participants referred to the short timescale within which they had been required to move into their accommodation – described as a particularly difficult process for those who had been in temporary accommodation for some time. These participants referred to accessing settled accommodation as a significant relief and a clearly positive step, but also as bringing some significant practical difficulties and in some cases anxiety associated with the demands of adapting to a “sudden” change in circumstances. These practical challenges were primarily related to accessing furniture and appliances, some need for repairs or redecoration, and arranging bills etc.
- 4.24. Some had been disappointed with or concerned about the suitability of their accommodation. These concerns appeared to be most commonly related to poor repair or need for redecoration, but some also raised more significant concerns around the location of their home and access to informal support networks. Some had felt obliged to accept offers that may not have fully met their needs – “I felt like they just needed me out of the [temporary accommodation] unit”.

Support to sustain a tenancy

- 4.25. Most participants commented positively on the support available around their initial move into settled accommodation. This included support from landlords, homelessness services, dedicated support workers, other (primarily third sector) agencies and family/friends.
- 4.26. Specific practical assistance cited by participants included help to access furniture and household goods/appliances including decorating packs, help to access additional funds for household goods, help planning the move-in process, and help with budgeting (including maximising benefit income and dealing with arrears). Participants noted how important this assistance had been for them, not just in minimising their

anxiety around the move, but in helping to make their new tenancy “more homely”. This latter point was particularly important for households with children.

- 4.27. Feedback on this practical support included reference to participants’ initial engagement with their landlord as having been an important opportunity to highlight their specific circumstances and needs, and to identify any relevant sources of support. However, some participants suggested that they had received relatively limited support from their landlord around their initial move to settled accommodation. These participants indicated that they had relied primarily on their support worker and informal support networks, and commented very positively on these as sources of support around the transition into settled accommodation.
- 4.28. Views were less positive about access to emotional support following their move to settled accommodation. A number of participants indicated that they had found the period following their move emotionally challenging, including feelings of loneliness and difficulty adjusting to a “normal” life following what for some had been a prolonged period in temporary accommodation. This appeared to be a more acute problem for those with mental health needs, those moving to a new area and/or away from family, and those who had been dissatisfied with the condition of their property. Some felt that they had limited contact with their landlord or other offers of support once the practicalities of the initial move-in process had been dealt with.
- 4.29. In contrast, households who had maintained contact with third sector organisations or other sources of support highlighted the value of this for their tenancy sustainment – “it’s just having someone to talk to”. Some wished to see more action from landlords to help those experiencing loneliness and social isolation following their move to settled accommodation.

5. TENANTS OF SOCIAL RENTED GYPSY/TRAVELLER SITES

Key messages

Participants commented very positively on landlords' management of improvements to bring sites up to standards. Tenants informing improvements, advance notification, and follow-up to ensure the quality of works were key positives.

In addition to positive impacts for the appearance of sites, participants also highlighted significant positive impacts for their quality of life. These most commonly related to refurbishment of amenity blocks and installation of fences to pitches.

Some felt that site improvements could have had a greater impact for tenants, particularly where improvements were perceived to have benefited some tenants more than others, and where there were outstanding safety concerns.

Suggestions for further Site Standards reflected key themes such as safety and security, and individuals' circumstances and experience.

- 5.1. Engagement with tenants of social rented Gypsy/Traveller sites focused on experience of improvements to meet minimum Site Standards published by the Scottish Government, the extent to which improvements had an impact for tenants, and suggestions for further standards that could benefit those living on Gypsy/Traveller sites. Current Site Standards cover the physical facilities and fabric of sites, services provided by the landlord such as repairs and maintenance, and how tenants are treated including consultation with tenants.
- 5.2. As is noted in section 1 of this report, the approach to engagement with tenants of Gypsy/Traveller sites was adapted in light of social distancing controls introduced to tackle COVID-19, to avoid any in-person engagement. This has had an impact on the number and profile of participants, with interview fieldwork involving 22 tenants across 5 Gypsy/Traveller sites. **As such, findings presented over the following pages should be treated as illustrative.**

Bringing sites up to standard

- 5.3. Engagement with Gypsy/Travellers first sought views on the process of bringing sites up to standard over recent years.
- 5.4. Qualitative findings made clear that participants saw improvement works to ensure sites meet Standards as a significant positive. All participants referred to improvements having been undertaken in recent years, and commented positively on these. Specific works mentioned by participants included:
 - **Upgrades to amenity blocks** including new kitchen and bathroom facilities, replacement of flooring and general interior decoration, and renewal of cladding.
 - **Upgrades to site pitches** including resurfacing, installation of fences and gates to pitches, and upgrade or provision of storage sheds.
 - **Upgrades to site facilities** including new play parks and recreation areas, installation of additional fire safety measures, upgrades to drainage,

refurbishment of communal buildings, and installation of individual post boxes for each pitch.

- **Other physical improvements** including clearing of refuse, landscaping and development of new access routes.
- **Service changes** included reference to more frequent engagement with tenants, such as regular 'estate walks' to gather views on the need for repairs and maintenance, and the establishment of resident groups for Gypsy/Traveller site tenants.

In their words...

"What a difference it has made. The site is a lot more appealing – people weren't keen to move on here but now everyone talks about the site being cleaned up."



5.5. Participants also referred to planned improvement works across several sites. These included further upgrade or replacement of amenity blocks and refurbishment of play parks. This included some examples of where planning improvement programmes had been interrupted or otherwise rescheduled.

5.6. Participants were also positive around their landlords' management of works completed to date. Key elements of this process highlighted by participants were advance notification of planned works (views being particularly positive where this involved in-person engagement allowing tenants to express their views), sensitivity to households' needs when planning any decant of tenants, and follow-up by site wardens or other service staff to ensure works had been completed to the required standard.

5.7. Qualitative findings also highlight that tenants had been able to influence the planning of improvement works across several sites. Several participants commented that landlords had canvassed views in advance of improvements, and this was seen as a key element in ensuring works would address any tenant concerns. It was also noted that published Site Standards match well with tenant priorities.

In their words...

"They have cleaned it up fantastically. We can feel proud of the site."



5.8. Some participants had also had an opportunity to influence the specific design of improvement works such as the choice of pitch fencing and design choices for refurbishment of amenity blocks. This was also seen as a key positive, in terms of ensuring improvements met tenants needs but also giving tenants a sense of 'ownership' and reinforcing that their views are valued by landlords.

5.9. Where tenants did not have any input to improvement works, this appeared to have contributed to some frustration with the planning process – and in some cases a view that the design of completed works could have been improved. This included for example the design of fencing to pitches.

5.10. The time taken for works to be completed was also highlighted by some as a point of frustration. However, this was most commonly related to cases where planned improvement works had to be altered or rescheduled due to unforeseen circumstances, such as a need to re-design elements of planned works, or unexpected issues encountered in the process of undertaking improvements.

Making a difference for tenants

5.11. All participants were positive about the difference that improvements had made to their site. In addition to very positive views on impact for the appearance of sites, participants also highlighted significant positive impacts for tenants' quality of life. The importance of tenants' input to the planning and design process was emphasised here.

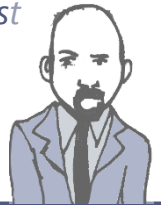
5.12. Specific positives highlighted by participants most commonly related to refurbishment of amenity blocks making these more usable especially for young children and older people or those with long-term illness, and to installation of fences to pitches improving safety and security. Several participants also referred to the improved visual appearance of sites as a result of clean-up and landscaping improvements – this was seen as a key factor in helping tenants feel a greater sense of pride in their home, and feeling that the site is valued by the landlord. Participants also referred to the positive impact of improved consultation with site tenants, in terms of feeling that their views are valued and supporting identification of further improvement priorities.

5.13. Some participants felt that site improvements could have had a greater impact on quality of life for tenants. This was typically related to:

- Where improvements were perceived to have benefited some pitches or tenants more than others. Specific concerns were most commonly focused on refurbishment of amenity blocks, including examples of where refurbishment was only carried out for older amenity blocks or those in significant disrepair, or where some were replaced with larger amenity blocks while others were only refurbished. A small number of participants raised concerns regarding the equity of this approach, although it was also recognised that landlords had prioritised those amenity blocks most in need of improvement.
- Outstanding safety concerns, particularly relating to young children on the site. This included comments around a lack of gates to some pitches and the condition and suitability of play park facilities.
- A lack of improvement to facilities for children, including to play park facilities and communal buildings used for education and leisure purposes.
- Improved maintenance and cleaning of sites being undermined by what was described as some site tenants not taking responsibility for their pitch.
- Concerns regarding a lack of contact with other site tenants, and the mix of site tenants frustrating the development of a stronger sense of community for sites.

In their words...

"A massive, massive change for the site. It feels like there is interest in the site, and the quality of life for tenants."



Taking site standards further

5.14. Engagement with Gypsy/Traveller site tenants also explored views on the extent to which Site Standards could be extended to further improve the quality of sites, and the quality of life for site tenants. Perhaps unsurprisingly, priorities identified by participants reflected the improvements to date which were seen as having the

greatest impact for tenants, and areas where participants had seen more limited improvement in site provision.

- 5.15. Specific suggestions for further Site Standards are summarised in the table below. These appeared to reflect a number of key themes which were evident throughout engagement with research participants. Safety and security were key themes, reflected in the positive impact reported around improvements to pitch fencing and fire safety facilities, and underpinning suggestions for a requirement for fences/gates to pitches and better quality play facilities for children. The importance of amenity blocks for tenants' day to day lives was also reflected in a substantial number suggesting further improvement to blocks.

In their words...

"Improving things for children would be the next big thing."



- 5.16. Suggestions also appeared to reflect individuals' circumstances and experience. This included for example specific outstanding issues for their site or pitch, and family circumstances such as families with young children being most likely to focus on play parks and safety facilities.

Further Site Standards suggested by participants

Pitches

Fencing and gates to pitches. This was the most common suggestion in relation to site pitches, particularly for those with young children.

Pitch surfaces. In addition to the condition of pitch surfaces, some wished to see a specific Standard requiring hard standing for all pitches.

Site facilities

Amenity blocks. Further improvement or replacement of amenity blocks was the most common suggestion, perhaps reflecting the frequency of use of blocks. All participants referred to amenity blocks having been upgraded, but some noted that this had not been completed for all pitches and expressed concern about equity for tenants. Suggested improvements focused on newer kitchen and bathroom facilities, remodelling to provide more space, and improved insulation and heating.

Facilities for children. A number of participants felt that play parks on their site are no longer fit for purpose, including some concerns regarding safety for younger children associated with the condition of play equipment and absence of safety gates. Play parks was the most common suggested Site Standard for children, but participants also suggested other facilities such as space for provision of education and healthcare on sites.

Mailboxes. Providing individual boxes for delivery of mail direct to site pitches reflected some concerns around mail being delivered collectively to the site office, particularly where site staff are not present for a period of time.

Consultation and fair treatment

The role of site tenants. A recognition that site tenants are best placed to identify issues for Gypsy/Traveller sites, and ensuring that tenants have meaningful input to decision making processes related to sites.

Consultation. Regular engagement with site tenants to identify outstanding issues and/or inform identification of future improvements.

6. FACTORED OWNERS

Key messages

Some were very positive about their service, referring to key ‘values’ such as approachable, responsive, and treating owners fairly. Views were particularly positive where participants felt that they had an input to decisions affecting their property.

Negative feedback typically related to general maintenance standards, quality and cost of larger repairs, and how factoring charges related to the service they received.

Views were varied on value for money. Some felt that higher costs were justified by the service quality, or compared both the cost and quality of their service favourably with alternatives. Others found it difficult to judge without a cost comparison.

Positive feedback on wider communication from factors included reference to feeling that services had demonstrated their interest in owners’ views and experiences.

The approach to engagement with service users was also important for owners’ overall view on their factor. Where services provided positive engagement opportunities, this was seen as demonstrating respect for owners.

- 6.1. Engagement with users of social landlord factoring services focused on experience of service to date, communication with the factor, and engagement with service users. Findings are based on qualitative telephone interviews, incorporating interviews with 27 owners across 9 factoring services.

Experience of factoring services

- 6.2. Participants reported a mix of experiences and views on their factoring services. Some were very positive about their service provider, in relation to regular maintenance and upkeep of common areas, and larger repairs or improvements. These positive comments often included reference to key ‘values’ such as services being:
- Approachable and personable, including some of those using services provided by a smaller landlord who referred to staff by name and who valued a more ‘personal’ service.
 - Responsive and keeping promises, including particular praise where owners felt that their service had been pro-active in identifying need for repairs or maintenance work.
 - Treating owners fairly, and taking the time to understand individuals’ circumstances and needs.
 - Representing good value for money.
- 6.3. Views were particularly positive where participants were open in their communication with owners, and where they felt that they had an input to decisions affecting their property.

In their words...

“They are fantastic by comparison with my private factor. Never any issues, good communication and are fair in how they treat owners. Most importantly, they manage the building so our property is kept in good condition.”



- 6.4. Negative feedback from participants typically related to a poor standard of general maintenance (including concerns about the negative impact on properties where owners felt that communal areas are looking 'tired' due to inadequate maintenance) and the quality and cost of larger repairs or improvement work. Specific concerns around the cost of larger repairs included examples of proposed repair work not going ahead because owners had objected to what were seen as inflated costs (*"I could have arranged the work myself for half the price"*). Some also expressed frustration where they had to make multiple approaches to their factor before repairs are completed, or where there appears to have been a breakdown in communication between different service departments such that they have had to repeat their request multiple times.
- 6.5. Participants were generally fairly clear on what their factoring charges cover. This included particularly positive comments where landlords had provided an easy to understand breakdown of charges, and were pro-active in notifying owners of upcoming repair costs.
- 6.6. However, some felt that they did not have a good understanding of how factoring charges related to the service they received. This included some participants who received itemised billing from the landlord, but who were still unclear on what specific charges related to (*"the 'management fee' goes up every year, but I don't know what they do for that"*) or felt that the itemisation did not accurately represent the service provided. This included a small number who suggested that their factor did not keep to the schedule of cleaning and maintenance specified in their billing.
- 6.7. It was clear that a lack of clarity about service costs, or concerns that the service provided was not consistent with their billing, had an impact on participants' overall perception of their factoring service. Some of these respondents suggested that their service provider was concerned only about billing, and felt that they should take more account of the needs and preferences of owners – *"they always make sure the bills are out on time, but I'm not really sure what they do"*. This appeared to reflect a wider view, also referenced by those who gave their factoring service a positive rating, that owners should be able to influence decisions that would ultimately affect their assets.
- 6.8. Differing views on the standard of factoring services were also reflected in the varied feedback on the extent to which services provide good value for money. The perceived quality of service appeared to be a key factor here. For example, some owners suggested that their service costs were somewhat higher than others, but felt that they received a good standard of service. Others reported that their experience was that factoring charges for social landlord services were considerably lower than private factoring charges, and compared the standard of service favourably. This included some participants who owned multiple properties with a mix of social landlord and private factors.
- 6.9. Some participants noted that they found it difficult to judge the relative value of their factoring service due to a lack of information on comparable charges. It was suggested that most owners would not be able to make an informed value judgement unless they had prior experience of comparable services, and some wished to see this information made available to owners.

Contact with the factor

- 6.10. As noted above, factoring services being approachable and responsive to service requests were key positive attributes highlighted by participants. These owners reported positive experiences in terms of ease of accessing their service, both in terms of multiple communication options being provided, and the knowledge and manner of service staff in dealing with requests. Several participants reflected positively on the extent to which factoring service staff had taken the time to understand their query or request. In contrast, a small number of participants expressed significant frustration where they felt that they had been “*fobbed off*” by service staff when raising queries or concerns.
- 6.11. A number of participants provided positive feedback in relation to wider communication from their factor, over and above regular billing. This included examples of services providing regular newsletters, communication to keep owners up to date with planned improvement programmes, and a small number citing examples of surveys and other options for owners to provide their views to the service. The extent and quality of communication from the service appeared to be an important element in owners’ overall view of the factor as an organisation. Again this included reference to owners feeling that services valued their views and experiences.
- 6.12. In addition to owners reflecting positively on their factor being proactive in their approach to communication, others expressed dissatisfaction with the level and quality of communication they received. This included reference to insufficient detail being provided on billing for maintenance and repair work. Reflecting concerns regarding the extent to which services were achieving value for money, some participants wished to see more detail on the process by which factors secured a competitive quote for larger repairs and improvements. Some also suggested that they received little communication from their factor outwith regular billing, and wished to see improvement in this area.
- 6.13. A small number of participants had raised concerns or made complaints about their factoring service. The experience of these participants is consistent with wider feedback that services are generally easy to access. As such, those who had not had cause to make a complaint were generally comfortable that they would be able to do so without difficulty.
- 6.14. The way in which services handled and responded to complaints was a key aspect of participants’ experience. Positive comments described services and staff as being ‘approachable’ and ‘not defensive’. Some also referred to service staff taking the time to understand owners’ concerns. The extent to which staff demonstrating an interest in owners’ experience and wellbeing was again a key factor for participants.
- 6.15. A small number of participants described negative experiences when making a complaint. This included reference to uncomfortable or heated exchanges with service staff where participants felt that their complaint was not being given due consideration, or where they felt that staff were questioning the validity of their complaint. In addition to how services had dealt with complaints or concerns, participants made clear that the outcome of complaints was also important. For example, most of those expressing concerns about how their complaint had been handled felt that the issue had not been remedied.

Engagement and influencing decisions

- 6.16. Factors' approach to engagement with service users emerged as a particularly important factor in owner views on their communication with the factor. As noted earlier, this included a number of positive examples where owners felt able to provide feedback to the service and (most importantly for owners) that this feedback could influence decisions affecting their property. Examples included regular surveys of factored owners, and ensuring resident groups are open and accessible to owners.
- 6.17. These participants felt that factoring services providing positive opportunities for service user engagement demonstrated that the service recognised their role as a part owner of communal elements of their building, and as such they felt more valued by the service. Participants also referred to examples of landlords adapting their approach to improvement or maintenance works to take account of owners' preferences, such as offering owners the option to join a programme of re-painting external windows and doors.
- 6.18. The importance of engagement with service users was also evident in less positive feedback from owners. Some felt that they did not have access to meaningful opportunities to provide feedback to the factor, or to influence decisions relating to maintenance and repair to their property. This included some owners who indicated that they had no opportunity to influence decisions due to a large majority of properties in their building being owned by the Council or housing association (such that a majority of votes could be secured irrespective of owners' views).
- 6.19. Participants indicated that this lack of influence or control was especially frustrating for them as an owner of their property. Some also contrasted the participation mechanisms available to tenants, and felt that their factor placed lesser value on their input as an owner.

In their words...

"They do seem genuine in seeking our input – it's good that they ask for owners' views alongside tenants."



PANEL MEMBERSHIP

The Panel seeks to engage with a good cross-section of tenants and service users. Current members include social tenants, people who have used homelessness services, tenants of social rented Gypsy/Traveller sites and owners using social landlord factoring 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. Total Panel membership stands at 462 at the time of reporting.

The current Panel profile suggests several 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 potentially those aged under 35.

A profile of the current Panel membership is provided below.

Current membership	462
Age	
Under 35	16%
35-44	15%
45-59	28%
60-74	28%
75+	10%
Unknown	3%
How would you describe your gender?	
Woman	55%
Man	45%
In another way	1%
Housing Tenure	
Council tenant	39%
RSL tenant	43%
Owner	6%
Gypsy/ Traveller site resident	7%
Unknown	6%
Have used homelessness services	
Yes	5%
No	95%
Ethnicity	
White Scottish, British or Irish	86%
White other (inc Scottish Traveller, Gypsy/ Traveller)	9%
Black Minority Ethnic	2%
Unknown	3%
Disability	
1 or more disabilities	37%
No disability	48%
Unknown	15%
RTO membership	
Member of RTO	23%
Not a member of RTO	77%