

Losing Faith in Tenant Involvement

by Leeds Tenants Federation

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Tenants are losing patience with consultation events they see as just tick box exercises.

Despite all the effort that tenants put into participating with their landlords in a bid to improve their housing services, it seems they are seeing less and less results. Many now think that consultation in Leeds is a tick box exercise and that landlords are not serious about listening to tenants.

These impressions are supported by a national survey from the Tenants Services Authority. Across the country, there has been a marked and steady decline in the extent to which tenants believe their landlord effectively takes their views into account in making its decisions.

In the representative survey carried out by Leeds Tenants Federation last year only 19 per cent felt that their landlord took their views into account a lot, while nationally the average was 16 per cent. This percentage had fallen by almost half (from 31% to just 16%) compared to where it was in 1995.

Nowadays tenants are invited to a bewildering variety of focus groups and panels where their landlord asks their views on services ranging from caretaking to investment. Tenants and residents association member probably spend more time at meetings called by their landlord than they do campaigning on their own local issues. Yet increasingly it seems tenants' views are not leading to improvements to the way our homes are run.

Consultation is now just another word for informing people. Planners come to a local community, put up an exhibition, tell people what they intend to do and

call it consultation. But there is little evidence that they listen to people's views or change their plans as a result.

According to the Tenant Services Authority half of all social housing tenants have lost faith in participation and want nothing to do with the consultation sessions put on by their landlord. One of their main reasons is because they do not believe the landlord takes any notice of their views.

Consultation through focus groups and surveys has replaced negotiation with representative residents associations as the main way that policy and services are reviewed by landlords. Where once trained tenant delegates would have convened working groups negotiating on issues like repairs, or major works, now landlords are more likely to taxi individual tenants to a session where they are asked their personal views over a cup of tea and a bun.

Landlords have disempowered tenants by concentrating on market research techniques rather than collective methods of participation. They control what they consult on, when they consult and what they do with the views they collect.

And yet for the tenants' movement, participation is about making public services more democratic. That means that tenants need the opportunity to consult and represent a wide range of views. They need the opportunity to talk over these views amongst themselves and produce their own ideas for change.

Tenants and residents groups, and federations, allow people to discuss their experience of housing services in a supportive environment, and generate tenant-led ideas for change. They can then follow through these ideas by monitoring and inspecting their landlord.

Tenants should be able to lead the discussions with landlords and say what they want to talk about and when. And they need to see real signs of progress and be able to review services and hold landlords to account if no change has taken place.

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