

# **TENANTS VIEWS OF PUBLIC RENTED HOUSING**

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## **SUMMARY**

There is currently a considerable debate about the future of public sector housing in the U.K. A number of different options are available, but the general view is that there is a need for energetic and innovative approaches to make the tenure a tenure of choice and one attractive for people to continue to live in.

Housing provided by local authorities and housing associations (Registered Social Landlords) has had a key role in improving the circumstances of households in Wales and in providing opportunities for individuals and families to improve their housing conditions. However, it is apparent that changes in the housing market, in the economy and in the aspirations of individual households make it essential that we re-think the role of public sector housing.

Owner-occupation is the dominant tenure in Wales and the preferred tenure for most households. Public sector housing has increasingly been associated with a range of problems and its reputation has been affected. Most households appear to aspire to owner-occupation and the role of council housing is too often that of a second best, or stop-gap, tenure. In recent years rising levels of turnover and void property have been widely taken as evidence that the demand for public sector housing is not guaranteed. Younger households and those taking up tenancies from councils and RSLs for the first time do not see the property they move into or the tenure that they move into as the one that they will stay in for the rest of their lives. Much more likely than with previous generations, they will expect to move on to other dwellings and tenures. It is against this background that it is important that we better understand residents' and tenants' attitudes to public sector housing and housing estates.

This report presents the results of new research carried out in Wales designed to add to the evidence which is relevant to the discussion of the future of public sector housing. It provides one input to that debate and it is essential that the evidence presented here is taken in combination with other types of evidence. The evidence collected here has been particularly concerned to report the views of tenants and residents. It has adopted a methodology which maximises the opportunities for people to speak in their own words about their views of public sector housing rather than responding to closed questions set by researchers and reflecting researchers' views. The research has been based on a series of group discussions which provide the opportunity for people to discuss the issues that are important to them and to discuss them in the words that they choose.

The research reported here involved 24 group discussions or focus groups with 184 participants. These groups were drawn from 7 estates and the research involved setting out the key characteristics of those estates. This is a very substantial research project providing a sustained assessment of attitudes to public sector housing. The present report provides a synthesis of the material collected through the research and of its implications. After setting the wider context, the report briefly summarises the key features of the 7 estates involved and the views of residents' living on those 7 estates.

These data demonstrate a variety of circumstances but also some common and recurrent themes. There are positive as well as negative views expressed about estates and about landlords and communities. It is evident that although there are some similar concerns on different estates, the underlying factors which contribute to the situation on different estates are different. Estates have been built at different periods, to different designs and to different qualities. They have served different communities and local economies. As these local economies have changed and as the people living on the estates have changed different tensions and problems have arisen. There are distinctive combinations of factors in different places and the appropriate responses to these are different. The research emphasises the need to develop estate-specific strategies and to design these in the light of the real circumstances on estates.

It is apparent that public sector, whatever its qualities and the difficulties in the communities that it is housing, is put at risk by a variety of factors. Some of these are to do with resources and the working through of social, demographic and economic changes. Others are to do with the responsiveness of landlords to problems of repair and dilapidation of properties and, perhaps more importantly, to the maintenance of estates and neighbourhoods and the quality of local facilities serving neighbourhoods. Concerns relate to property condition, repairs and maintenance but also to estate maintenance, refuse collection, local facilities for children and young people and the extent to which decisions about traffic or policing are sufficiently responsive to the needs of residents.

There is a general concern that estates are not well-managed or that management does not listen sufficiently to residents or respond to what they say. In this context residents do not distinguish where the responsibilities of their landlord finish and those of other agencies start. What they are aware of is failings to provide seamless service delivery which makes estates attractive and desirable places to live. They are conscious of waste and inefficiency and lack of clearly defined responsibility to deliver high quality services.

The implications of this research are that there is a major task in rebuilding public sector housing and rebuilding trust with residents on estates. Some of this is directly about the quality of housing services, but the agenda does not stop there. It is fundamentally about the level of resources and the adequacy of a range of local services operating at an estate level. It is about neighbourhood facilities and management rather than housing management. At the same time there is an issue about listening and responding to residents which is associated with rebuilding trust. There is considerable debate about empowerment of

residents' organisations. However, the group discussions reported in this study demonstrate considerable scepticism and a lack of belief that the conventional mechanisms for resident representation and consultation are effective and are worth residents investing time in. The experience of these organisations does not lead people to be enthusiastic about committing time in the future.

There is a danger that policy conclusions which recommend more listening and responding to tenants merely lead to an increased usage of mechanisms which are seen to be failed and damaged. There is a need for some more innovative thinking about ways of involving residents in estate management.

Finally, a major theme in this research is concerned with perceptions of waste and resident perceptions that the organisation and management of housing rewards new residents and increasingly invests in properties and people who create problems or who move on. While residents have considerable loyalty to their landlords and tenures, it is not clear that landlords reward the loyalty of long-established tenants. There are few incentives to stay, but considerable incentives to leave, including the Right to Buy.

The research suggests that there is some need to re-balance this equation and to provide more incentives and rewards which would encourage the rebuilding of trust between landlord and tenant and greater stability in the tenant population. Making estates more attractive to live in is not just about attracting people for the first time: it is about making existing residents want to stay longer. In the final analysis, unless action is taken to rebuild trust and to encourage stability the prospect for public sector housing will continue to be one where it provides a safety net of high turnover, volatile, estates which will continue to be associated with disorder and problems and will not provide satisfactory places for people and families to live in the long-term.

