

## 2.6 Levels of tenant participation

There are a range of ways that landlords and tenants can exchange information and views on housing issues and make decisions together. Different processes for different issues should be commonplace. For participation to work, tenants must see the value of getting involved, decide the level of participation they wish to be involved at, and decide how they wish to be represented.

Research carried out by TIS and Glasgow University ('A Good Practice Framework for Tenant Participation in Scotland') highlighted three different levels of tenant participation:

- consultation;
- deciding together;
- acting together.

In order to participate effectively at any of these levels, information and support is essential. Tenants need to have all the information necessary to consider issues properly. In order to do this landlords and tenants should jointly agree on an information strategy. This would set out how information will be communicated between all participants. It is important that information is:

- easily understandable;
- made available with sufficient time for tenants to fully participate, consult with others and give their views;
- accurate;
- relevant;
- made available in formats that suit the user, such as Braille, audio tape and community languages.

Within the limits of confidentiality all participants should have equal access to information that is relevant to tenant participation. Where information is sensitive it should be made clear why it is restricted and that participants are bound by confidentiality.

Tenants must have the opportunity to identify what support they need to participate. There should not be practical or financial barriers to tenant involvement. Where appropriate landlords should ensure that:

- meeting venues are accessible;
- meetings are held at times that suit tenants;
- funding is available to cover crèche or care costs;
- transport and out of pocket expenses are reimbursed promptly;
- communication aids (loop systems, interpreting) are available;
- relevant training is provided.

Tenants will need access to equipment such as photocopiers, computers and internet access and these costs should be met by the landlord. Staff support should be available to groups to assist them in the day-to-day running of their group.

## Consultation

Landlords are legally required to consult with RTOs and individual tenants on a range of housing and related issues, which may affect them under Section 54 of the Housing (Scotland) Act 2001.

Consultation provides tenants with an opportunity to give their views, but does not give the opportunity to develop their own ideas or participate in putting the plans into action. Consultation involves asking for tenants' views in order to consider them before reaching decisions, with sufficient time for tenants to formulate their views and landlords to consider them, and agree to the outcome together.

There are a range of consultation methods that can be used, including:

- focus groups and working groups;
- postal, phone and door-to-door surveys;
- house visits;
- conferences;
- road shows;
- tenants' forums;
- consultation registers.

Whatever method is used, it is essential to provide tenants with sufficient time to respond. Where possible it is also sensible to avoid carrying out a consultation exercise at times of the year where tenants are less likely to be able to get involved, such as over Christmas and New Year or the summer holiday period. The timing of religious festivals should be considered. Most importantly, consultation should be carried out before proposals are formulated, although there will be occasions (involving legal requirements, for instance) where the outline proposals are already formulated and are not negotiable.

It is vital to feed back to tenants the results and outcomes of a consultation exercise. This is often the missing link and can lead to misunderstanding, break down of trust and disillusionment. Where feedback is not given tenants may be reluctant to get involved in the future. Feedback should include the options that have been considered, and the decisions and actions agreed, along with any future activity. The feedback should be provided within an agreed timescale and format.

## Deciding together

Negotiation between tenant representatives and landlords suggests that both parties have an interest in reaching a mutually satisfactory outcome. This type of negotiating relationship often takes time to develop but is the most positive working relationship tenants and landlords can have.

This involves tenants contributing ideas and options at the outset in deciding the best way forward. This process is likely to involve tenants' representatives and groups rather than individuals. Most of the common structures set up to achieve joint decision making are established over a period of months or years. These structures could be long-term forums that cover a number of areas or short life working groups set up to tackle a specific issue. In reaching a joint decision, the process tends to be smoother where tenants have been involved at the start of the process and have been involved in actually defining the nature and scale of issue. If a shared perception of the issue emerges it tends to be easier to reach agreements about solutions.

Research indicates that it is often landlords who stop short before the 'deciding together' stage, because they underestimate the potential of tenant groups to get involved. Sharing power may require a fundamental change in an organisation's culture, and staff are more likely to take participation seriously if there is commitment from the top.

## Acting together

This involves tenants and landlords working together to develop plans and ideas and put them into action. Examples of tenants and landlords working effectively together are provided in the good practice briefings in Section 5.

At all levels of participation the National Standards for Community Engagement should be adopted. The standards are a practical tool to help all participants involved in community engagement to achieve the highest quality of process and results. The standards can be used in both formal and informal community engagement. For more information see the standards at [www.ce.communitiesscotland.gov.uk](http://www.ce.communitiesscotland.gov.uk).

## Planning tenant participation activities

There is no blueprint for planning tenant participation. Different ways suit different circumstances. Approaches should be flexible to suit the particular issues and the level at which tenants wish to get involved. When agreeing the best tenant participation approach for particular issues, there are a number of key steps to consider. The flow chart (figure 1), taken from the 'Good Practice Framework for Tenant Participation in Scotland', outlines the key steps that tenants and landlords need to consider when planning tenant participation activities.

Figure 1. Process for planning tenant participation

