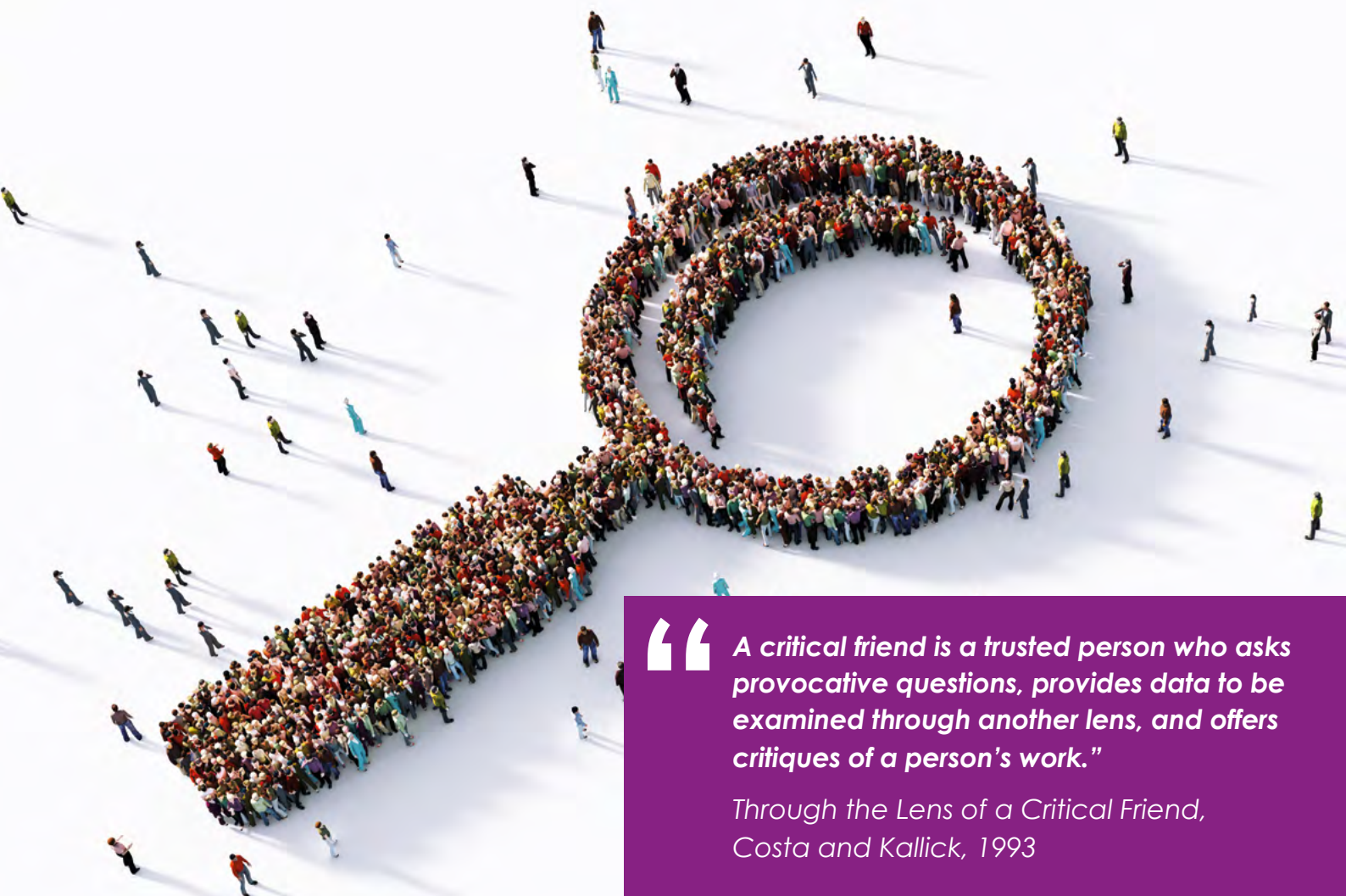




Championing
better homes and
communities

Critical Friends

What tenant scrutiny brings to
better landlord performance



A critical friend is a trusted person who asks provocative questions, provides data to be examined through another lens, and offers critiques of a person's work."

*Through the Lens of a Critical Friend,
Costa and Kallick, 1993*

April 2023

ALMO housing companies are 100 per cent owned by their parent local authority. Across the country, 23 ALMOs manage around 303,000 homes. They deliver both core housing management and a range of other services to support tenants and their communities and meet the social objectives of their parent local authority.

The NFA is the membership body for ALMOs. Its support for members includes the sharing of best practice from the sector, lobbying policymakers at all levels on their behalf and promoting the ALMO model of social housing management.

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Whilst all reasonable care and attention has been taken in compiling this publication, the authors, publishers and editorial team regret that they cannot assume responsibility for any error or omission that it contains.

Contents

In a nutshell...	4
What makes a good tenant scrutiny function?	4
What are the main threads emerging from scrutiny reports?	5
Introduction	6
1: Principles	8
1.1 Core principles	8
1.2 The tenant perspective	10
2. How the ALMO sector organises tenant scrutiny	11
2.1 Scrutiny panel formation	11
2.2 Choosing areas to scrutinise	12
2.3 Agreeing actions and monitoring progress	12
2.4 Communicating what scrutiny achieves	12
2.5 Reviewing scrutiny arrangements to respond to Social Housing White Paper	15
2.6 Tenant satisfaction measures	15
2.7 Diversity	16
2.8 Case studies	17
Berneslai Homes: A two-tier model	17
Blackpool Coastal Housing: 'top-end' customer involvement	18
Stockport Homes: Customer Scrutiny Panel	19
Lewisham Homes: An autonomous committee of tenants and leaseholders	20
Colchester Borough Homes: The 'tenant inspectors' model	21
South Tyneside Homes: Embedded in governance	22
Solihull Community Housing – SCHape independent tenant panel	24
Homes in Sedgemoor – 'bootcamp methodology'	24
3. Scrutiny findings	26
3.1 Communication	26
3.2 Other common scrutiny report themes	27
3.3 Damp and mould scrutiny	27



In a nutshell...

The purpose of this report is to highlight the importance of good tenant scrutiny. Rather than just report the models that are used in the ALMO sector, we have also spoken to tenants who are involved in scrutiny to understand why they do it and what makes it work.

So much of what tenants tell us comes down to the relationship that they have with their landlord; a relationship characterised by honesty, trust, openness and good communication. Scrutiny should be valued and tenants should feel they are helping to make their landlord a better landlord.

This demands organisational commitment in the form of high-quality officer support and the embedding of scrutiny in formal governance structures. It also demands an organisational culture in which senior staff champion and respect the work of scrutineers.

We hope that this report provides principles and examples to support both the council and wider social housing sector to develop effective scrutiny mechanisms in the light of the Social Housing White Paper and new regulatory environment.

What makes a good tenant scrutiny function?

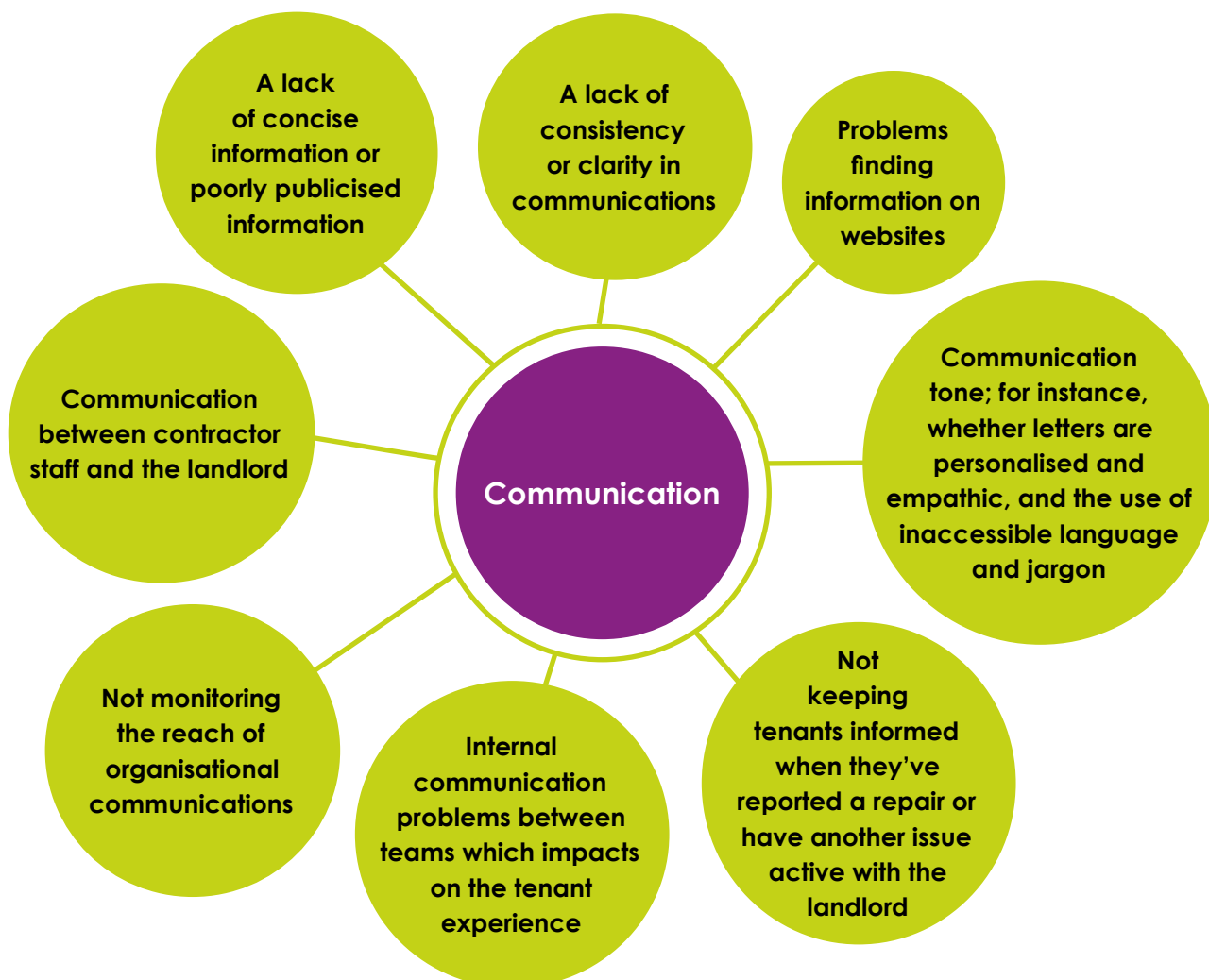
Summary of key principles from tenants, officers and research:

Formal recognised status and structures; and clear access to board decision-making	Panels are asked to scrutinise only what can genuinely be changed and understand why their landlord wants their scrutiny	Buy-in from senior staff and board members
Proactive attempts to recruit diverse members and to make sure panels are inclusive	Tenant-led and independent	Investment in tenant engagement staff to support the panel
Investment in panel members through training and development	A mature relationship between the panel and the organisation, with tenants acting as a 'critical friend'	All staff are invested in tenant scrutiny, and trust that panels can be effective.
Linking scrutiny panels to other tenant engagement methods, and making sure there are ways for all tenants to feed in their views	Development of action plans that follow through on scrutiny findings, with a clear process to monitor progress against recommendations	Truthful, useful, easily understandable data and information from the organisation to help tenants choose areas to scrutinise and do the scrutiny

What are the main threads emerging from scrutiny reports?

We have looked at a range of scrutiny reports from across the sector to draw out similar threads. These threads match many of the themes currently being worked on by DLUHC, the Regulator of Social Housing and the Housing Ombudsman, illustrating how important it is to listen to tenants and what a useful resource tenant scrutiny panels can be in quickly picking up issues and resolving them.

By far the biggest topic area for recommendations is communication. For example:



Some of the themes emerging from tenant scrutiny recommendations

What questions should executive teams and boards be asking?

- Can we evidence that we effectively communicate with tenants?
- Do we have a genuinely effective, independent tenant scrutiny function?
- Do we have evidence that tenant scrutiny exercises have improved the core services that tenants receive?
- Are we doing everything we can to recruit a diverse panel that is representative of the communities where we work?
- Do staff from different teams respect the panel and want to work with it?
- Do we have a 'can do' approach to the requests of the scrutiny panel and the recommendations they make?
- Do we clearly communicate with tenants the findings of scrutiny and other tenant engagement activities?

Introduction

It is now coming up to six years since the Grenfell Tower fire, and over two years since the publication of the Social Housing White Paper.

Social housing landlords should have spent this time making sure that their housing services are good quality, that their relationship with tenants is positive, and that the tenant voice is heard. They should be ready to demonstrate all this in the coming regulatory regime.

The Regulation of Social Housing bill is currently working its way through Parliament. When it becomes law, the Regulator will then consult on new Consumer standards. Although the Regulator is still determining the details, in January 2023 it clearly set out **overarching principles** of how it will regulate. The implementation plan says the Regulator will seek evidence that:

- landlords maintain tenants' homes so that they are safe and of a decent standard, and provide a quality service;
- where things go wrong, complaints are handled effectively, and things put right;
- the relationship between tenants and landlords is underpinned by shared expectations of fairness and respect and a shared understanding of their respective rights and responsibilities;
- landlords demonstrate that they understand the diverse needs of the communities that they serve and this is reflected in their services;
- tenants understand, use and have confidence in the process by which problems are resolved;
- stakeholders have confidence that landlords' commitment to their tenants is underpinned by effective consumer regulation, whether that landlord is a housing association, council or for-profit provider¹.

There are excellent landlords within the social housing sector. But an increasing number of organisations are coming to the attention of the Regulator of Social Housing, the Housing Ombudsman and the media as increased oversight draws attention to poor services or quality of homes. The comments of the Rochdale Coroner in 2022 about the failings of Rochdale Boroughwide Housing have focused attention on the management of damp and mould in social housing, but other areas of concern include more general health and safety compliance, customer service and complaints handling, and the quality of data management systems.

At the same time, the social housing context has become more challenging for landlords. COVID-19 repairs and maintenance backlogs, aged stock, high inflation and labour market difficulties are causing financial and operational difficulties. The cost-of-living crisis is having a huge impact on tenants and, in turn, on landlords. The government also cut social housing rents by one per cent each year for the five years up to 2020, and this has not only depleted rent accounts but has also created a much lower baseline for future increases post-2020. All these factors together are having a real impact on the quality of core services that landlords are able to deliver.

¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/reshaping-consumer-regulation-our-implementation-plan/reshaping-consumer-regulation-our-implementation-plan>

Critical friends: the scrutiny function

This publication follows on from work the NFA published in 2022 on the Tenant Voice².

It looks specifically at **tenant scrutiny and the quality of the home**. Tenant scrutiny is a key tool in good housing management in the ALMO sector and will be crucial in supporting all landlords in their efforts to meet the demands of the Social Housing White Paper.

Tenant scrutiny is based on the principle that you should use the expertise and day-to-day experience of the people who live in the homes you manage to assess how you are doing and make improvements. Tenants know what it is like to be on the end of a landlord service. They bring a down-to-earth, independent focus to discussions and challenge organisations to do better. They also want to make sure services give value for money. Crucially, good tenant scrutiny is independent. It brings the perspective of a 'critical friend' to the work of landlords.

The Regulator of Social Housing will include the voice of tenants in its inspections, making sure that what tenants say matches the story that the landlord tells about itself, both internally and externally. Often tenant scrutiny panel members already do this, comparing the official description of a service offer with their own experience and the views of friends, family, neighbours, and social media groups. These comparisons are invaluable to a landlord determined to learn and improve.

Tenant scrutiny is one part of a large suite of engagement and involvement pathways for tenants. Not every tenant will want to scrutinise their landlord or have the time to do so. Some tenants get involved because they want to fix certain problems and step back once they are fixed. Others use the skills and training scrutiny gives them to go on to other roles. Scrutiny arrangements are constantly in flux and depend heavily on who and how many choose to get involved. But they also depend on assurance from landlords that tenants' voices are heard and make a difference.

This report looks at the various ways ALMOs organise and use tenant scrutiny, and identifies some of the common characteristics. The authors have spoken directly to tenants involved in scrutiny, asking what is important to them and how they perceive the scrutiny models they are involved in.

Part one summarises the core principles; Part two looks at how the ALMO sector organises scrutiny, and Part three looks at the themes which emerge from scrutiny reports in the sector.

² Tenant Voice, <https://www.almos.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/The-Tenant-Voice-April-2022.pdf>

1: Principles



Scrutiny is a critical examination of services, underpinned by good quality, up-to-date performance data and information that is made available to those involved in scrutiny activities”³

CIH Scotland, 2017

1.1 Core principles

There is no single approach to tenant scrutiny across social housing landlords, but it is possible to identify the core principles of good practice.

A lot of the recent theoretical work on tenant scrutiny dates from the end of the proactive regulatory regime in 2010, when the social housing sector moved to reactive co-regulation. Tenant scrutiny was seen as a way to compensate for the lack of a strong regulatory hand so that tenants could hold their landlord to account. Research therefore asked what best practice for this function would look like.

The Stepping up to Scrutiny training and learning programme (2014–2016) developed for the Scottish government by CIH Scotland and HouseMark Scotland⁴ identifies three foundational principles for tenant scrutiny.

- **Independence:** Scrutiny activities should be separate from governance, management and mainstream tenant participation structures, but have a formal recognised status with support from the organisation at the outset
- **Formality:** Scrutiny activities should include clear roles, remit, terms of reference and lines of reporting for those taking part
- **Power:** Tenants and other customers involved in scrutiny activities should be able to examine services and standards and recommend how services can be improved. Landlords should respond by saying which recommendations they will implement and – with a full explanation – which they will not

Tenant engagement experts Tpas set out similar principles⁵:

- **Independence:** The scrutineers need to have the independence to choose what they wish to scrutinise and to carry out that scrutiny
- **Formality:** They need a formal remit with clear terms which clarifies their role and boundaries of scrutiny including how it relates to other resident involvement activities, the landlords and the board/council
- **Resident power:** Effective scrutiny has to be able to influence the direction of the organisation and its services. It requires clear powers and linkages to ensure this is the case

³ <https://www.cih.org/publications/developing-effective-tenant-scrutiny-a-practice-guide-for-landlords-and-tenants>

⁴ As above, CIH Scotland 2017

⁵ <https://www.tpas.org.uk/scrutiny-services>

Expanding on this, scrutiny expert Dr Dave McKenna working with Tpas has identified ten helpful factors that successfully embed tenant scrutiny in councils.⁶ These include:

1. **Learning and development:** tenants have the knowledge, skills and confidence they need
2. **Support and resources:** tenants have the resources they need to be effective and aren't out of pocket
3. **Relationships and respect:** trust and mutual appreciation help to ensure a constructive relationship
4. **Organisational culture:** all officers are responsive to tenants and the organisation is committed to tenant engagement
5. **Role and recognition:** scrutiny has a clear and understood role in the decision-making structures for housing
6. **Scrutiny process:** a consistent and robust approach is in place for in-depth scrutiny
7. **Senior buy-in:** a supportive and positive culture is led from the top
8. **Access to information:** tenants have the information they need to pick topics and reach conclusions
9. **Recruiting and retaining:** processes are in place to help find and appoint new members who are right for tenant scrutiny
10. **Keeping in touch:** engagement structures are in place that help scrutiny to hear from a wide range of tenants

Though the landscape has changed since publication, the principles outlined in *Top tips for tenants: holding your landlord to account through scrutiny* (CfPS and SEP, 2012)⁷ are still extremely useful and give tenants and landlords a sound guide to setting up a resident scrutiny function that overcomes a range of challenges.

Its core principles are:

1. Residents act as a 'critical friend'
2. They enable the voice of *all* residents to be heard
3. Scrutiny is tenant-owned and tenant-led
4. Findings help to improve services

The practical tips for making scrutiny effective include:

- setting clear terms of reference for the panel and for individual scrutiny reviews
- defining how meetings are conducted so that everyone can contribute, including a clear code of conduct that everyone can understand and sign up to, and which sets the tone of deliberations and participants' expectations
- providing scrutiny panels with the right amount of easily understandable, timely information – not swamping residents with lots of performance data and spreadsheets
- aiming for clear and practical recommendations that can realistically be acted on
- follow-up checks to make sure recommendations have been implemented as promised
- tenants and residents need ways to assess what impact they might be able to have before carrying out a review; the right sort of and level of information to help scrutiny decide what to investigate, ask the right questions and develop relevant useful recommendations. In particular, customer satisfaction and experience data and information from a variety of sources to ensure scrutiny's work is well-evidenced and based on real experiences

⁶ Tpas, Successful scrutiny for council tenants, <https://www.tpas.org.uk/knowledge-hub/download/824>

⁷ <http://tenantadvisor.net/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/Top-Tips-for-Tenants-in-Scrutiny.pdf>

- making sure scrutiny findings mesh with and are complementary to other monitoring and evaluation work, rather than being treated as a stand-alone process
- holding meetings on estates and in local venues to bring in people who would not have gone to head office for a meeting
- reports that are open and honest, produced by scrutineers who are trusted by landlords to 'do the right thing'⁸

Several organisations in the social housing sector provide training, networking and best practice for tenants and organisations; they include Tpas⁹, the Chartered Institute of Housing¹⁰, HQN¹¹ and TAROE Trust¹². The importance of training for scrutineers was a key message from the conversations with involved tenants for this report. However, this training may not always be formal: for example, several ALMOs use an independent mentor to provide 'on-the-job' training while others bring together tenants from different organisations to learn from each other.

1.2 The tenant perspective



Tenant scrutiny committees need to choose what to scrutinise. Don't lead us by the nose on this. Scrutiny is quite simple. You scrutinise something you feel is failing. You pick up projects from complaints, KPIs that sort of thing..."

CLlr Bernie Donnelly, tenant and board member of Solihull Community Housing

Research for this publication and the previous NFA publication Tenant Voice (2022) feeds into the following summary of the principles ALMO tenants have said are important for scrutiny.

- Tenant-led: rather than staff leading tenants through issue-focused groups or meetings, scrutiny should be led by tenants over time, and scrutiny panel members must be able to talk to each other outside the control of the organisation
- Staff respect: staff need to be invested in tenant-led scrutiny and trust that scrutiny panels can be effective
- Constructive internal working relationships: strong working relationships between panel members, supported by long-term secure funding and consistent encouragement that underpins a scrutiny panel's sense of its own worth and longevity
- Clear access to board decision-making: panels should be able to present their findings to boards and understand how they will be used to improve services
- Making a difference: panels are asked to scrutinise only what can genuinely be changed and understand why their landlord wants their scrutiny, and they are told how their findings are used
- No judgement, no consequences: tenants involved in scrutiny must be sure that they will not be penalised for speaking out
- Word-of-mouth: If scrutineers' experience of being involved with their landlord is poor, they will pass that on to neighbours and family
- Triangulation: tenant panel members' own experience and reports from other tenants matches the organisation's own reports and data and the story the organisation tells about itself

⁸ As above, Top tips for tenants in scrutiny pp 14 - 16

⁹ TPAS, <https://www.tpas.org.uk/>

¹⁰ Chartered Institute of Housing, <https://www.cih.org/>

¹¹ HQN, <https://hqnetwork.co.uk/>

¹² TAROE Trust, <https://www.taroetrust.org.uk/>

2. How the ALMO sector organises tenant scrutiny

Scrutiny models within the ALMO sector include:

- A traditional independent tenant scrutiny panel
- Scrutineers drawn from a pool of interested tenants for one-off meetings or scrutiny activities
- Resident or tenant-led board sub-committees that take on the scrutiny role, or commission scrutiny through separate panels
- Panels that operate outside the ALMO, managed from the local authority side of the ALMO-council relationship

Case studies that illustrate how each of the models work in practice can be found at the end of this section (p18).

2.1. Scrutiny panel formation

ALMO scrutiny panels have on average nine members and take on between one and four exercises a year. Such panels are usually a formal part of the ALMO's governance structure.

They usually report directly into the main board or board sub-committee with a focus on customer service and performance. Some panels are asked to present their written report to the committee or board and discuss their findings directly with members.

A few ALMOs appoint an independent mentor to support the work of their panel and make sure their reviews are robust and useful. For example, Stockport Homes' customer panel has an independent mentor who works with the panel for two hours once a month and regularly keeps in touch with them. Lewisham Homes tenants are also supported by an independent mentor who helps the panel to choose, plan and undertake scrutiny exercises. Tenants interviewed for this report who had access to an independent mentor thought they were very useful and valued their input and support.

“ Our independent mentor has a wealth of experience. She has a way about her and can honestly tell us when we're going off script. She helps us with thinking about how we can scrutinise and the questions we should ask. I think her being independent helps us to really scrutinise transparently.”

Christina Hilton, Resident Scrutiny Committee member, Lewisham Homes

Some scrutiny panel members are also active in other parts of their ALMO's tenant engagement work. At Tower Hamlets Homes, the panel attends joint strategic business planning away-days with the board. At South Tyneside Homes, the panel writes the organisation's annual report; and holds quarterly Performance Challenge sessions at which the panel reviews all the KPIs reported to the Board and operational and strategic issues.

2.2 Choosing areas to scrutinise

ALMO scrutiny panels usually independently choose the areas they wish to scrutinise. One of the strongest messages to emerge from the tenant interviews for this report was that while scrutiny must aim to be useful to the organisation and not just become a vehicle for individual or group grievances, panels should also be able to decide for themselves what they scrutinise.

Examples of how areas for scrutiny were selected included:

- analysis of corporate performance data and trends in specific service areas;
- customer feedback, satisfaction and complaints data;
- feedback from tenant engagement, including the views of tenants' and residents' associations and requests from individual panel members;
- continuation of a previous scrutiny exercise;
- national and/or local priorities;
- recommendations or requests from senior management teams, boards and board sub-committees;
- requests from service managers who, for example, might be considering a change to current services.

2.3 Agreeing actions and monitoring progress

When a panel recommends action, implementation and monitoring of progress should be part of the formal governance process. This may include:

- Developing an action log that sets timescales and is monitored by the panel, officers and the board or sub-committee.
- Monitoring by the parent council – for example, adding actions to audit trackers and reviewing in contract meetings.
- Regular progress reports to the panel, and a process that allows the panel to raise concerns about progress against the action log.

2.4 Communicating what scrutiny achieves

ALMOs use social media, their websites and tenant newsletters to share the outcomes of tenant scrutiny work. As the main 'window' into an organisation, websites provide much of the information about how tenants can get involved in scrutinising the organisation and what comes from that scrutiny.

The Regulator of Social Housing's planned proactive regulation will include desktop review of how effectively landlords communicate, and clearly websites will be an obvious place to look. How is the tenant voice heard and how easy is it to find information, report issues and get involved?

Some websites in the ALMO sector do these tasks well, but some could be improved. Not all make it easy for tenants to access basic and frequently requested information. To test website accessibility, set a simple challenge: is it possible for someone unfamiliar with the site to find a specific piece of information, such as how to make a complaint, within five minutes? If not, something needs to change. This is, of course, a task that scrutiny panels could be asked to consider.

The fundamentals of effective landlord website content include:

- Is general navigation intuitive and easy, and when you find information, is it clear?
- Is information dated, and is it up to date? Where the website says 'we are going to...' or 'we are planning to...', is it clear what the timescale for this is, and are there updates on progress?

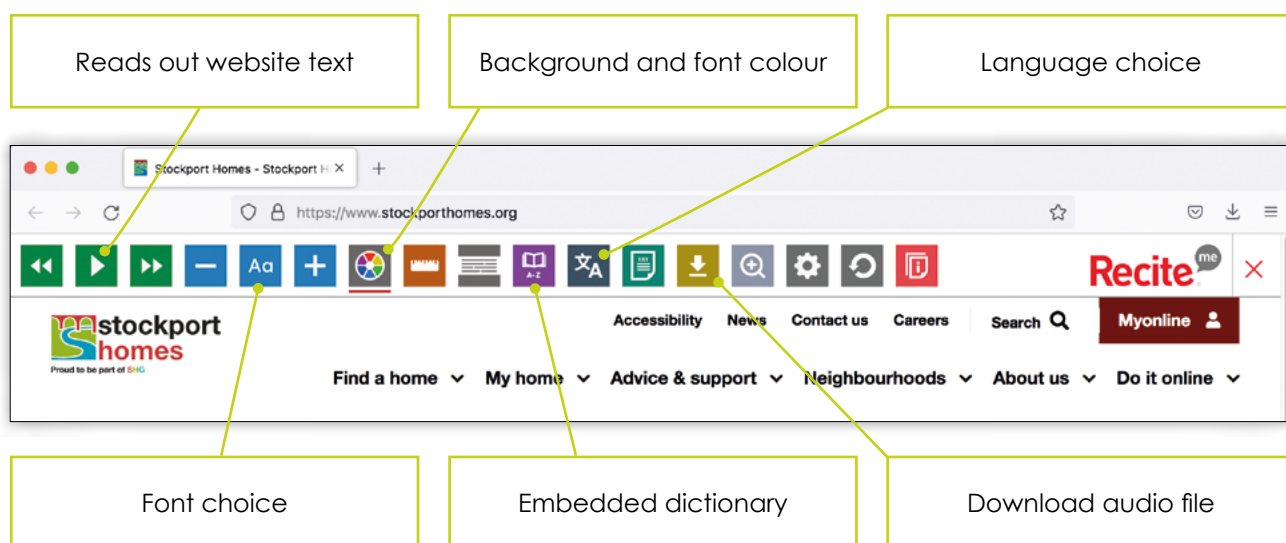
- Is it clear what has become of tenant scrutiny panel findings? Could you quickly find out how tenants have scrutinised services, what they found out, and whether the organisation does things differently as a result?
- Is the information easy to read and in different formats that will reach the biggest possible range of audiences (for instance, both typeset and in visual infographic or video formats)?
- Is it simple and quick to find out how to complain, report a repair or contact the organisation?
- Are videos and animations accessible to all – for example, do they also have text, and do they present it at a speed and in colours and fonts that work for most people?
- For tenants who don't have access to the internet or need support to use online services, are there other sources of information for them? And can they access training to use online services if they want to?



Stockport Homes has developed a new website which is easy to navigate and supports customers to self-serve. Over 1,500 customers were involved in its design and procurement.

Clearly signposted is a separate section dedicated to the Customer Scrutiny Panel¹³. This offers 'you said, we did' feedback and explains in jargon-free language how customers can get involved. Customers can express interest or suggest scrutiny topics using webforms.

Accessibility features across the site include a 'recite me' function that reads out screen text in over 100 languages. Readers can also choose settings such as font size, colour, screen mask, magnifying glass and use the built-in dictionary to check text or ask questions of a chatbot.



Stockport's most recent Annual Report was written under the scrutiny group's direction and in consultation with 6,000 customers. The report has been produced in video format, presented in 'chapters' so that customers can navigate quickly between topics. A digital written version is also available; print copies can be requested and have been distributed to certain groups and to Stockport Homes' main customer hub.¹⁴

Stockport's scrutiny panel report a very proactive approach from their landlord to supporting customers both online and offline. Stockport Homes offers training and the use of computers in the main office hub, but also communicates in more traditional ways and does not assume everyone is online.

¹³ <https://www.stockporthomes.org/my-home/customer-voice/customer-scrutiny-panel/>

¹⁴ <https://www.stockporthomes.org/about-us/annual-and-financial-reports/annual-reports/>



Lewisham Homes has a very clear and easy to find 'You said, we did' webpage which sets out the conclusions of resident consultation and what has changed as a result¹⁵. All teams within the organisation are expected to find ways to speak to tenants about the work they're doing, and feed back to them – including through the 'you said, we did' page of the website – how tenant views have influenced what they do.



¹⁵ <https://www.lewishamhomes.org.uk/your-community/get-involved/our-consultations/you-said-we-did/>

2.5 Reviewing scrutiny arrangements to respond to the Social Housing White Paper

A number of NFA members, when asked about tenant involvement in their work, reported that they are reviewing their scrutiny arrangements in response to the Social Housing White Paper. For instance:



Wolverhampton Homes

In response to the Social Housing White Paper and new regulatory reforms, Wolverhampton Homes is developing new scrutiny arrangements alongside tenant engagement experts Tpas. To maximise the opportunity to influence the sessions with customers' voice, workshops have been held with involved residents to co-design the approach.

A wider consultation seeking views from all Wolverhampton Homes customers asked whether they were interested in being involved in developing and improving their landlord's services. Close to half said they would like to be involved, and interest was highest among those aged 44 and under. Interest dropped with age, with just a third of over-65s wanting to be involved. There was also a significant difference between Black, Asian, and other ethnic groups; with 71 percent of Black respondents and 54 percent of Asian respondents stating an interest in being involved, compared with around 41 percent for all other ethnic groups.

These insights have helped to shape the new scrutiny model and prompted further research into segmentation testing and customer capabilities, moving away from recording vulnerabilities and towards recording capabilities.

A Wolverhampton Homes customer panel will oversee the customer voice and the annual scrutiny programme. The results of the Tenant satisfaction measures will inform choice of scrutiny topics. Individual scrutiny programmes will adopt a task-and-finish approach. Customer panel members will be recruited to provide support and oversight for each specific topic, and their involvement will be incentivised with vouchers. The overarching customer panel will deliver the results of scrutiny and other updates to the Communities and Service Delivery Committee, a sub-committee of the Wolverhampton Homes board.

2.6 Tenant satisfaction measures

Organisations must start gathering Tenant satisfaction measures (TSM) data from April 2023. While plans for exactly how the results will be integrated into scrutiny are still being developed by many ALMO landlords, it is clear that TSM data will be used by scrutiny panels to determine future focus. Some ALMOs report that their scrutiny panels will certainly be involved in monitoring TSMs. For example:

- Berneslai Homes is integrating TSMs into their performance management framework which is already monitored by its Tenant Voice Panel.
- Homes in Sedgemoor's Tenant Assurance Committee is a sub-committee of the board and will monitor TSMs and broader service satisfaction surveys. They have a bespoke performance scorecard and six-monthly in-depth report that updates the board on all aspects of customer complaints, feedback and learning.
- Six Town Housing already has its own performance indicators that are monitored by the scrutiny group through a tenant scorecard. These indicators are being reviewed and will include the new TSMs.
- Stockport Homes' Customer Scrutiny Panel monitors corporate indicators and will be involved in monitoring TSMs in the same way.
- Solihull Community Housing's scrutiny panel monitors key performance indicators and will incorporate TSMs into their current scorecard.

2.7 Diversity

One of the key challenges in any engagement work is making sure that all voices are heard. Scrutiny arrangements have to be part of a wider approach to involving and engaging tenants. Not everyone has the time to commit to formal scrutiny, but there are many other reasons why tenants would not want to get involved in this kind of work.

The findings and recommendations from *Increasing Diversity in Research Participation: A good practice guide for engaging with underrepresented groups* (NHS, 2023)¹⁶ transfer well to tenant engagement work, particularly around practical suggestions to increase participation among under-represented and minority groups. It identifies three primary barriers to involvement – language, accessibility and mistrust – and details specific findings from six underrepresented groups (Roma, young adults living in temporary accommodation, South Asian older adults, military veterans, digitally excluded people living in rural groups, and Black African and Black Caribbean people).

Engagement officers interviewed for our report said recruiting (and keeping) diverse participants was a clear challenge, particularly with young participants and those from diverse ethnic backgrounds. Some NFA members have reformed their scrutiny structures hoping to involve more tenants by moving to task-and-finish and topic-focused scrutiny, and by supporting scrutiny panel work around surveys, meetings and focus groups to gather the views of a broader selection of tenants. Moving scrutiny online has also helped in some cases.

Tenant scrutiny panels need administrative support from staff. Interviewees for this report stressed how important it is that landlords fund good officer support for scrutineers and provide sufficient resources and time to make panel meetings accessible for all.



Lewisham Homes

Lewisham Homes is very careful to ensure that its approach to hearing the voices of residents is inclusive and accessible. For example, staff go door-knocking once a month to different estates to give residents who might not be heard through other channels the opportunity to speak directly to their landlord. For example, estates with a low number of residents with an email address are targeted.

Through initiatives such as this, the team can identify residents who may like to be involved in scrutiny and follow up with information and encouragement. Although this is more resource intensive – for example, demanding the delivery of printed materials for those not online – this proactive approach helps widen the representativeness of the scrutiny panel.

¹⁶ <https://www.england.nhs.uk/aac/wp-content/uploads/sites/50/2023/02/B1905-increasing-diversity-in-research-participation.pdf>

2.8 Case studies



That concept of trust between the tenant, the group, the organisation... you've got to have that confidence that, yes, you're getting all the information, you can rely on that information. Openness and honesty has got to be there..."

Brian Griffin, scrutiny panel member, Berneslai Homes

This section offers a brief snapshot of scrutiny in practice, looking at the varied approaches ALMOs take towards tenant scrutiny based on interviews with ALMO staff and tenant scrutiny panel members.

Case Study

Berneslai Homes: A two-tier model



I am there to make sure that the service provided by the landlord is appropriate, suitable and cost-effective for tenants. We're there to make sure tenants are getting best value for money..."

Brian Griffin, Berneslai Homes

The role of the Tenant Voice panel and scrutiny panel (collectively known as Tenant Voice) at Berneslai Homes is to challenge performance, influence service and policy development and offer assurance to the board and local authority. This is a two-tier model which allows the Tenant Voice panel to concentrate on compliance.

Two members of the Tenant Voice attend the Customer Services Committee, a sub-committee of the board; and two attend the strategic liaison meeting with the parent council. The Tenant Voice panel has up to nine members who monitor ALMO compliance with the Regulator of Social Housing's requirements by assessing performance against a range of local offers and consumer standards. They also have access to a suite of performance reports and officers will attend meetings to provide further information if asked. The Tenant Voice panel can pass on any areas of concern to the scrutiny panel for further in-depth investigation.

The scrutiny panel has a pool of 10 tenants with a wide range of interests and knowledge, and up to six members are recruited for each project.

Scrutiny starts with a scoping session between staff and the panel to fully understand what the goals are. The panel has access to a range of performance data, policies, practices and procedures, and can call on the following:

- Meetings with officers and service leads
- Job shadowing
- Service testing
- Commissioning questionnaires
- Meetings/focus groups with customers
- Journey mapping

The completed report is shared with section leads for their response. An action plan is developed, the report is shared with the board and published on the website, and the action log is monitored by the panel. Service improvements are also added to the service improvement log which is monitored by an officer.

This model has moved tenant scrutiny to the forefront of the organisation; staff want to make use of the scrutiny arrangements to improve their own service areas.

Case Study

Blackpool Coastal Housing: 'top-end' customer involvement

“ “ *It is independent and tenant-led, and well backed by the directors and staff. The panel gets a good backing and we can ask for anyone to come and speak to us. We've developed a good relationship over the last 12 years.”*

Blackpool Coastal Housing TOWER Scrutiny panel chair

Blackpool Coastal Housing has a scrutiny panel of up to 10 members, called TOWER. The panel is a 'top end' mechanism of customer involvement. Once a scrutiny has been decided, members meet regularly, either online or in person, to implement and review an action plan. TOWER will look at all the relevant service documentation, performance information and any complaints about the service.

Panel members carry out customer surveys and look at the customer journey to find out how the service is received, identify any issues or improvements required and review satisfaction levels. The panel can shadow Blackpool Coastal Housing staff, and service managers and the relevant service directors are also interviewed.

A written report is submitted to the senior management team and Blackpool Coastal Housing board. Panel members also present it in person at a board meeting and discuss their findings directly with the senior management team and the board.

Recommendations are monitored using a tracker, which sets three priority levels to determine which improvements are completed first. These actions are added to Blackpool Council's audit tracker and progress is reported to the audit committee by the ALMO's Director of Resources. The tracker is reviewed every six months when the panel can discuss any issues with the service manager and address how the new actions have been received by customers and whether services have improved. At this stage they may be signed off as completed.

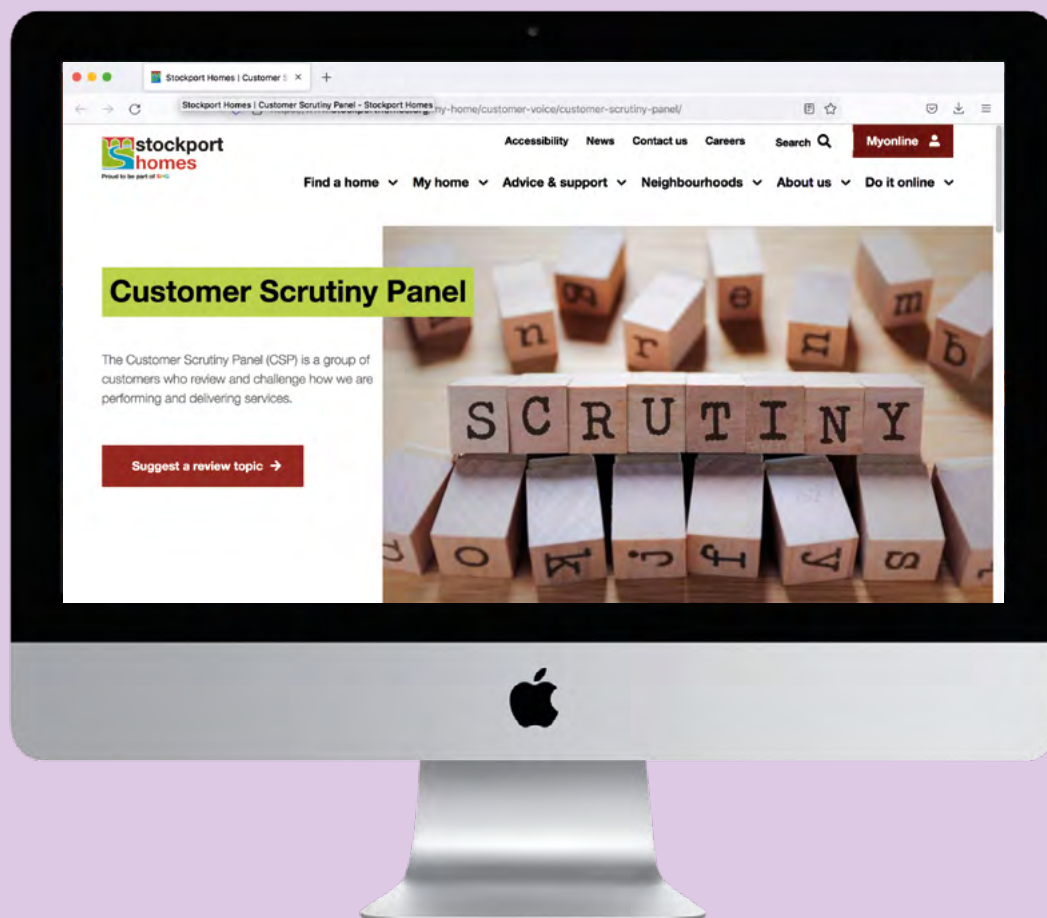
The panel are currently conducting a scrutiny on how Blackpool Coastal Housing deals with damp and mould cases. In total, over 16 scrutiny exercises have been conducted, covering areas such as repairs, complaints, lettings and anti-social behaviour.

“ “ *Our scrutiny panel gives our Board and managers a really thought through and valued insight into how we operate with the reviews they do. The panel are a great critical friend and produce reports that not only highlight areas for improvement but also give us some of the solutions making sure we improve our services and customer satisfaction.”*

Blackpool Coastal Housing Chief Executive, John Donnellon

Case Study

Stockport Homes: Customer Scrutiny Panel



“The most important thing for us is the ‘can do’ attitude from staff, and the fact we are listened to; the fact that we can scrutinise them and can put our point of view over to change things. We feel listened to by management. They never dismiss us, they come back to us, and we feel appreciated”

Bob McGechan, Customer Scrutiny Panel chair, Stockport Homes

Stockport Homes' Customer Scrutiny Panel reports directly to the Customer Focus Committee, a sub-committee of the governing board. The panel aims to do two scrutiny exercises a year, agreeing topics in partnership with the landlord. Recently it has examined the landlord's approach to damp and mould complaints, anti-social behaviour and the quality of the main telephone switchboard.

When the panel's focus is selected, the head of service/service manager from the relevant part of the business will explain current processes to the panel, answer any questions, and discuss/agree whether there is any scope for a service review.

An independent mentor will discuss the scope of the scrutiny and agree an action plan with the panel so that it can gather as much evidence as possible.

Exactly how scrutiny is done depends on the area under review, but the goal is an evidence-based assessment of whether or not there is a need for service improvement. The panel may:

- survey customers – for example, in the recent damp and mould scrutiny, the panel surveyed people who have reported damp and mould recently to understand their experience
- interview staff
- review the website or related documents
- use 'mystery shopping' methods or listen into phone calls.

During the evidence gathering phase, the panel meets fortnightly. It is common for queries to be raised each meeting and these are generally answered by email before the following meeting.

Panel investigations conclude with a report written by members with the support of the independent mentor. It is presented at a roundtable meeting to key staff from the relevant service area who are asked whether they consider the report to be factually correct. They are asked to respond to each recommendation, saying whether they seem fair and whether the improvements requested can be made.

The service is then asked to draw up an action plan for each agreed recommendation. When the panel is happy with the service response, the report and associated action plan are taken to the board sub-committee for overall approval. The ALMO governance team is responsible for requesting action updates from the service team on how the actions are being addressed and giving feedback to the scrutiny panel who can challenge the pace of progress.

During interviews for this report, scrutiny panel members spoke of the ALMO's 'can do' approach and responsiveness to the panel. Officers are very open and give as much information as requested. Panel members felt they had a positive relationship with the landlord and knew that their recommendations would make a difference to the quality of services. In particular, they said that their recent work on damp and mould, when combined with the work the landlord was already doing, would set standards for others to follow.

Case Study

Lewisham Homes: An autonomous committee of tenants and leaseholders



You're not trying to catch people out, you're just looking for an honest answer. You want to look and get the facts so you can say, we think this wants looking at, and then we decide the priority of actions. And we have got good feedback from staff."

Christina Hilton, Resident Scrutiny Committee member, Lewisham Homes

The Resident Scrutiny Committee at Lewisham Homes is an autonomous panel of council tenants and leaseholders, set up and funded by the Lewisham Tenants' Fund in conjunction with Lewisham Homes. The committee has eight members. It reports to the Service and Performance Committee, a sub-committee of the governing board, and its recommendations go to the board for approval.

Scrutiny committee members choose what to scrutinise and suggestions come from the Service and Performance Committee. Over time, a good relationship between committee and landlord has made honest dialogue possible about what areas of work scrutiny can most usefully focus on.

An independent mentor supports the committee's work and training is available for members. The mentor helps the panel pick the scrutiny topic, decide how to do the scrutiny, and supports during the process. Lewisham Homes staff support the committee but also understand how important it is for them to work independently.

For each topic selected, the committee carries out a scoping exercise, meets with the relevant team director and goes through the scrutiny process. Its recommendations then form part of an action plan that is monitored by the Service and Performance Committee and at meetings of tenant and resident association chairs. The results of scrutiny are publicised through the Lewisham Homes newsletter, social media, forums, text messages, and website articles. There is a specific 'you said, we did' section that highlights how the landlord has responded to resident feedback.

Likely barriers to joining the committee are explicitly tackled by Lewisham Homes. Initiatives include targeting communities where few residents have email addresses by arranging in-person meetings at which residents can find out about opportunities to get involved, and actively seeking wider representation among scrutiny panel members, such as a mix of tenure types.

The most important three factors for making sure the panel work from the tenant perspective are:

- Providing enough honest, good-quality information to residents so they can scrutinise the topic properly and come up with the right findings;
- Narrowing down a scrutiny to a specific, limited area that residents can scrutinise and make meaningful points about;
- Tenants doing scrutiny need to work as a team and have a good mentor.

Case Study

Colchester Borough Homes: The 'tenant inspectors' model

Colchester Borough Homes has a team of six Tenant Inspectors which reports directly to the board and Residents Panel. The panel was formed nearly two years ago. Tenant Inspectors work with total autonomy, supported by officers, and choose their scrutiny exercises independently based on discussions with and feedback from residents. The panel does not have a single person in charge. Members respect and listen to each other, and over time, have developed a team dynamic which means they can all use their skills and knowledge to support the group.

Tenant inspectors are given dedicated training from Tpas to undertake scrutiny, which they do through various means, including desktop research, data analysis, surveys, and interviewing staff and tenants.

Printed scrutiny reports are presented to the board, and findings are publicised in the organisation's Housing News and Views which is delivered to all tenants three times a year. The website also carries videos that explain the inspectors' work.

The inspectors' recommendations are acted on and progress is monitored by the customer experience

team, staff in the service area scrutinised, the residents' panel and the governing board.

In interview, we were told that – from a tenant perspective - the biggest take-away messages are:

- As a tenant, you need to be confident and able to put a point across with a degree of clarity;
- You need to have the time to invest in scrutiny. It takes commitment and effort, or scrutiny becomes 'just another focus group', which is not the same thing;
- You have to learn quickly how to leave your own problems outside of any meetings
- You have to recognise when you may be getting close to 'burn out', then sit back for a while;
- You need to be prepared to take any training which can help in your role within scrutiny.

Case Study

South Tyneside Homes: Embedded in governance



"We do it because we want to help and can help. We're out there and we see how it's working on the streets..."

Tris Francis, Scrutiny Panel chair, South Tyneside Homes

South Tyneside Homes has an independent 10-strong scrutiny panel which is a formal part of the organisation's governance structure. Scrutiny reports are presented to the ALMO board with organisational action plans that address the panel's recommendations. Actions are added to the formal performance management system which ensures regular reporting and review, and the scrutiny panel receives regular progress reports from the relevant head of service.

The panel's scrutiny work uses a wide range of tools and techniques including meeting staff, analysing data, site visits, carrying out surveys, customer journey mapping, mystery shopping and listening to calls to the contact centre.

Scrutiny members have other roles; they take part in recruitment of staff whose jobs will include work with tenant groups. A tenant panel member is part of the recruitment process and panel views are taken into account when a job offer is considered. The scrutiny panel also writes the South Tyneside Homes annual report¹⁷.

¹⁷ <https://www.southtynesidehomesannualreport.org.uk/>



Welcome

Tenant Involvement and Empowerment Standard

Tenancy Standard

Home Standard

Neighbourhood and Community Standard

Performance Overview

Making Money Matter

TENANTS' ANNUAL REPORT 2022

South Tyneside Homes
South Tyneside Council Housing Company

South Tyneside Council



TENANCY STANDARD

This standard focuses on the way homes are allocated and how customers are supported to maintain their tenancy.

This section covers:

Moving Home

MOVING HOME

Our teams are working more closely together to re-let our homes, completing any repairs more quickly, and improving re-let times as we know moving home can be an anxious time for customers.

There has been a reduction in empty homes during the year, from 195 in April 2021 to 116 in March 2022.

66

I'm greatly impressed with the standard of work that was carried out – It was worth the wait! Allocations staff have been really helpful and friendly – 5 stars!

A satisfied customer

99

The team have introduced several new processes during the year, including a



PERFORMANCE

This section gives a summary of key performance across the organisation.

PERFORMANCE AT A GLANCE

CUSTOMER SATISFACTION

Service Area	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22
Gas Servicing	94.17%	98.98%	97.77%
Making a Complaint	89.87%	89.87%	81.32%
Responsive Repairs	94.33%	96.50%	96.75%

WELFARE SUPPORT

	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22
Additional income secured for customers	£5.36M	£3.69M	£5.03M
Number of people assisted	3,829	2,173	3,151

ANTI-SOCIAL BEHAVIOUR

	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22
	989	1,061	678

<https://www.southtynesidehomesannualreport.org.uk/thefactbook>

Case Study

Solihull Community Housing – SCHape independent tenant panel

Solihull Community Housing has an independent tenant panel called SCHape. SCHape has seven members and reports directly into the Housing Operations Committee, a sub-committee of the board. There is a co-opted tenant board member on the panel which provides a direct link between the panel and the board.

The panel uses performance data and customer insight to identify what to scrutinise, and requests areas of concern from the executive leadership team and the board. The panel uses this information to identify areas to scrutinise, consulting with the wider VIP group (around 350 members) and the executive leadership team to decide where the focus of the review will be.

The panel undertakes around three scrutiny exercises a year, although this is flexible and led by the panel. Panel reports are provided to the executive leadership team to check context and sense check recommendations, but are reported directly into the Housing Operations Committee for approval of recommendations. Following board, an action plan with timescales is agreed with SCHape and the relevant officers. Progress is monitored by SCHape and reported to the committee.

Recommendations and outcomes are communicated through a specific section in the newsletter, as well as through the website and social media.

Case Study

Homes in Sedgemoor – 'bootcamp methodology'

Homes in Sedgemoor Tenants Assurance Committee (STAC) are a sub-committee of the board created to provide oversight and customer assurance. The committee reviews performance, customer experience and customer feedback information to identify areas where they wish to investigate a service or activity further. Customer satisfaction is a key driver for customer scrutiny.

Scrutiny panel membership for specific scrutiny activities is separate to STAC and is very flexible. This supports wider and more diverse customer engagement activity. Customers are invited to come, depending on the topic that is of interest to them, and participate in a 'bootcamp'.

Homes in Sedgemoor uses 'bootcamp' methodology to deliver scrutiny activity, which means focusing on one area over the course of a day with an independent facilitator. Customers collaborate with staff in the relevant areas. They look at: 'What's our process; What we actually do now- the customer journey; Satisfaction and customer feedback; What can we do better; what does good practice look like?'

The panel then develop an action plan to improve services. Actions and recommendations are proposed to the appropriate directorate lead. Actions are then undertaken by mutual agreement between STAC and the service directorate lead. Progress is monitored by STAC through reports provided on a six monthly basis. STAC can challenge progress against the action plan and hold service leads to account where agreed actions are not progressed as per the plan.

Examples of some of the changes which have been made include:

- In the responsive repairs scrutiny, customers asked that Homes in Sedgemoor offers an am or pm slot for their same-day repair. This is now in place and will be further enhanced in the coming weeks as the organisation has considered this with their new systems and introduced functionality where the customer can book their timeslot. The organisation also agreed to text out a survey about the repair straight after the visit. This is also now in place and customers have said this is very quick and easy and an excellent way of providing instant feedback.
- One of the findings from the ASB scrutiny was that Homes in Sedgemoor have a specialist officer and this role has now been designated within the housing team to lead on more complex cases.

Homes in Sedgemoor moved to the Bootcamp model because they wanted to get more and greater diversity of customers scrutinising services. Feedback is that the “one-day” targeted approach provides a good opportunity to focus on a task-and-finish basis rather than extended, multiple sessions that do not support customers with busy lives.

3: Scrutiny findings

ALMO scrutiny reports from the last three years were examined for this research. Scrutiny findings cover issues such as quality of homes and 'void' property standards, the lettings process, repairs, damp and mould management, planned and major works, and complaints handling. They pick out many areas where ALMOs are doing well and offer constructive recommendations to support with improving services.

Clearly, scrutiny focuses on a point in time and many of the findings are specific to the scrutineers' landlords. However, it is possible to pull out some common threads which are similar to the areas that DLUHC is tackling in its various work strands, and which will form part of proactive regulation. This shows the value of scrutiny and the need for organisations to get on the front foot in listening to tenants. The majority address the principles of good customer service.

3.1 Communication



Organisations often think they've communicated, but they don't always check that the communication has reached its audience."

Tenant panel member

The need for better communication is by far the most frequent theme of scrutiny reports, even if it is not explicitly described in this way. Some examples of report findings include:

- A lack of concise information for tenants about issues such as damp and mould, the complaints process, repairs process – or poorly publicised information, or information that is not regularly refreshed or updated.
- A lack of consistency or clarity in communications; the use of inaccessible language and jargon which may discourage complaints or lower tenants' expectations of the service they can expect.
- Problems finding information on websites, or missing information; scrutineers suggesting better ways to present information, such as videos.
- Not keeping tenants informed when they have reported a repair or have some other issue active with their landlord; tenants having to chase for information.
- Internal communication problems between teams which then impacts on the tenant experience.
- Not monitoring the reach of organisational communications; for instance, are social media posts being watched? Could they be more effective?
- Communication tone; for instance, are letters personal and empathic? Are they accessible (length, size of font, content, etc.)?

The issue of communication has been raised frequently by the Housing Ombudsman in its Spotlight reports, webinars and other work. For example, in the Spotlight report on damp and mould, *It's not lifestyle*, the Ombudsman makes a number of recommendations around improving communication. In its follow up report (2023) the Ombudsman states 'our call for evidence highlighted there is good practice regarding what actions landlords are taking, but this often isn't communicated effectively to residents'¹⁸.

¹⁸ <https://www.housing-ombudsman.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/Damp-and-mould-follow-up-report-final-2.2.23.pdf> p.6

3.2 Other common scrutiny report themes

Contractors

Contractor management is a theme in some scrutiny reports. The two key issues are communication between contractors and the ALMO; and how the ALMO takes responsibility for the service delivery by contractors.

The NFA will be examining asset management later in 2023 and will explore in more depth good practice around contractor management.

Gathering satisfaction data

Scrutineers often consider how tenants are surveyed about their experiences of a particular service, making sure that enough feedback is gathered to understand the quality of the service and how to improve it. This may improve as a result of the introduction of the TSMs and standardisation of the way perception data is gathered.

Staff training

Another theme is the consistency of staff training: are all staff up-to-date and following the same procedures so that services are consistent? A linked issue is whether individual staff take responsibility for making sure issues are resolved and not lost in the system. Pending approval of the Social Housing Regulation bill, the Regulator of Social Housing will be regulating against a Competency & Conduct standard which is intended to drive consistency across the sector and ensure staff are delivering services professionally.

Landlord response

Are the scrutiny panel's recommendations talked through with senior managers? Is there a process for agreeing what is realistic, what can be taken forward and what can't? Does the landlord explain its responses to scrutiny recommendations? Good action plans set out clearly what the organisation needs to do with a timetable and monitoring requirements.

3.3 Damp and mould scrutiny

Some ALMOs had already asked their scrutiny panels to look at their approach to damp and mould after the Housing Ombudsman published its Spotlight report, *It's not lifestyle*, in 2021. Considering organisations are already reviewing their policies, procedures, damp and mould cases and complaints in response to both the Housing Ombudsman's work and the Rochdale Boroughwide Housing case, there is huge value in getting the tenant perspective. No housing organisation is perfect, and there are always areas where improvements can be made.

We summarise three scrutiny exercises into damp and mould below.



Berneslai Homes

Berneslai Homes' scrutiny panel launched a thorough examination of how the ALMO manages damp and mould, prompted by the Housing Ombudsman's report in October 2021. This scrutiny began some months before the Rochdale Coroner published a written verdict linking the death of two-year-old Awaab Ishak to the poor condition of his family's home and their landlord's failure to put things right. The findings have been presented to the ALMO board alongside an action plan with 15 areas for improvement. These include, for example:

- Reviewing damp and mould training for staff
- Improving information provided to tenants, and developing a damp and mould campaign to encourage customers to report problems swiftly
- Proactively checking with tenants who have had no contact with the landlord, or who have not reported a repair in the last 12 months

- Reviewing the process for keeping customers informed when they are waiting for a repair
- Developing a process for assessing customer satisfaction after damp and mould repairs

The ALMO has established a task and finish damp and mould project delivery group which includes officers and two tenants from the scrutiny panel. These tenants feed back to a larger Tenant Improvement group. The delivery group will monitor the action plan to ensure that it is delivered.



South Tyneside Homes

Between February and November 2022, South Tyneside's scrutiny panel looked at how the landlord could improve its response to customers reporting damp and mould. The organisation had already set up a damp and mould working group to review its approach, and the panel's findings were reported back to it.

The damp and mould scrutiny was presented to South Tyneside Homes' board alongside an action plan developed and agreed by the scrutiny panel and senior management team. Its implementation will be monitored by the panel and the plan has been included in the organisation's performance management system. Actions taken are also regularly reported to and monitored by the senior management team. The ALMO also used the findings from the scrutiny to help develop its Damp, Mould & Condensation Policy which was developed in consultation with the panel.

Areas of improvement include, for example:

- Improving the systems used to link reports about damp or mould with all historic information on the property condition and current household information;
- Capturing information about residents' vulnerabilities likely to be affected by damp and mould, and deciding how this information is then used;
- Improvements to communications, both to raise awareness of damp, mould and condensation, but also once tenants have an active case.



Stockport Homes

Stockport Homes Customer Scrutiny Panel undertook a scrutiny into damp & mould following the Housing Ombudsman's report in October 2021, focusing on the quality of information available to customers on damp and mould, and how effective the organisation is in responding to reports of damp and mould.

To undertake the scrutiny, the panel:

- Heard from staff on how the service is delivered;
- Assessed the communications customers receive when they report issues;
- Analysed data relating to the number and resolution of damp and mould reports;
- Reviewed information provided on the website;
- Conducted a survey with customers who have reported an issue in the last twelve months.

The panel found that customers can easily report issues relating to damp and mould and that there is a clear process in place for responding to initial reports. Other strengths include the provision of information on mould and condensation, a consistent approach to first point of contact, the quality of surveyors and training provided, and the identification of other support needs and triaging of customers into other relevant teams.

The panel made recommendations for improvement in some areas, for example follow-up communication to check that a resolution has worked; and looking at how Stockport Homes Group gathers and uses feedback on how cases of damp and mould have been dealt with.

The report has been presented at Stockport Homes Group board by the chair of the panel alongside an action plan, and actions will be monitored by the panel and the board.



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