
The Involvement of Tenants in the Regional Agenda

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Summary: In the context of emerging new regional structures, this report makes suggestions for achieving tenant involvement from all tenures in decision making at the regional level. The report takes forward the proposals for tenant empowerment in the London Housing Strategy and identifies the need for consultation, research and resources. It also explores the complexities of developing new tenant structures.

Recommendations:

The Housing Forum for London is recommended to:

Note:

1. The shortcomings of existing tenant involvement at the regional level
2. LTF's expertise at delivering a democratic and accountable tenants structure across London.
3. The need to find funding solutions for tenant involvement at the regional and sub-regional level
4. The LTF request for a permanent policy sub-group on community empowerment and diversity as part of the new regional structure

Ensure:

5. The new regional structure for housing and planning includes sufficient representation of tenants from all tenures and strives to achieve equality considerations.
6. Consultation on the new regional structure includes meetings with tenant organisations, including LTF.
7. Any new tenant structures reflect the best practice approach outlined in the New National Framework for Tenant Participation Compacts

Support:

8. A separate and time limited Tenant Participation sub-group of the Housing Forum for London, comprising key stakeholders, to oversee research into TP provision across all sectors and to make recommendations for appropriate regional tenant structures.
9. The establishment of regional tenant structures for RSL tenants and private sector tenants, running parallel to, and developing close links with, the London Tenants Federation (LTF)

The Context

The London Housing Strategy 2005-16 identifies “Empowering tenants and residents” as one of its key aims. It explicitly says there will be research into appropriate London-wide structures for tenants in all tenures, with a target date of 2005-06 (page 88). It also refers to a study of BME tenants during 2005-06 (page 89). Traditionally, landlords have found it difficult to engage BME tenants and a strategy to significantly improve BME representation needs to feed into all new structures.

Furthermore, there is the key role of the 5 sub-regions and the sub-regional development frameworks in delivering the LHS, and yet there is the absence of tenant involvement within the sub-regional partnerships.

Previous regional structures have been criticised for shortcomings in tenant representation and responsiveness to tenants concerns. Therefore the LTF eagerly await the timetable for, and consultation on, the changes to regional governance. .

Existing structures - the London Tenants Federation

The LTF is the only existing London-wide tenant organisation. At the moment, there is no regional tenant organisation for RSL and private sector tenants. The LTF would like to see this gap bridged.

The London Tenants Federation (LTF) is an umbrella organisation bringing together London’s borough wide council tenant federations and organisations. Its remit is to facilitate the sharing and exchange of information and to provide a strong London wide voice for London’s council tenants. The LTF has a democratic and accountable structure, which accommodates the diversity of views and opinions within its member organisations. It acknowledges the independence of borough wide tenant federations who elect members to attend and vote at LTF meetings.

The LTF maintains good contact with council tenant organisations in 28 London boroughs.

It produces a quarterly newsletter on national and regional policies and how they affect London tenants and responds to consultations. It campaigns to get a better deal for Londoners e.g. recent campaigns include rent restructuring and with Thames Water. The LTF has links with other regional tenant organisations and TAROE (the Tenants and Residents Organisation of England). Its members attended housing seminars at the European Social Forum held in London last year and through that established links with European tenant organisations. It is currently hosting an exchange student from Paris, who is researching regeneration and social exclusion.

Links have also been built up with strategic bodies in London. The LTF has a good relationship with the ALG. ALG officers and elected members regularly attend LTF meetings. The LTF has special observer status at the ALG Housing Steering Group meetings.

The remit of the LTF has grown with the development of London wide decision-making housing structures. It has membership of the Housing Forum for London and 2 of its sub groups. It has had some discussion with the ALG around the possibilities of further engagement at the sub regional level. The LTF has also established a relationship with the Mayor's housing section and GLA officers attended a conference held on the LHS and a general LTF meeting.

Funding Issues

The LTF is an emerging organization that has had considerable achievements in the three years it has been in existence. It welcomes the opportunity to work with the Housing Forum for London to develop structures that give all tenants a voice in strategic housing issues, but this is not without resource implications.

Any decisions on new structures must take into account that the LTF only receives a small grant from the ALG, who for the last few years have provided funding for the LTF's half-time support worker post, however this funding is not guaranteed for future years and does not meet its current workload. The LTF has only a half-time post and needs proper funding so that LTF's expertise can be brought to all these areas of work. It requests that the Housing Forum for London recognises the LTF's need for additional funding/worker support to enable its members to engage fully within the regional housing structures and identifies funding solutions.

The Benefits of Tenant Involvement

The Government says that it is committed to "thriving, vibrant, sustainable communities", which LTF believes are not achievable unless tenants' views are heard and taken notice of. The LTF believes that good resident involvement is fundamental in achieving excellence in housing management.

The ODPM has supported this view in various policy documents. The Audit Commission notes that 'excellent' housing authorities have shown "that consultation and involvement always begins at an early stage; where service user views are taken into account before all key decisions are made, and where service users are consulted and involved in major decisions that affect the service".

Support for Tenant Participation in the new regional agenda must also reflect the best practice approach outlined in the New National Framework for Tenant Participation Compacts. Specifically,

- Tenants should have the resources, information and support they need to participate effectively
- Tenant representatives should be elected, and have a direct link to tenants at the local level
- All tenants should have clear information about how they can make an input into the regional tenant structures
- There should be a scoping study for BME tenants.

The new regional governance for housing

The London Tenants Federation (LTF) believes the changes in regional governance provide an opportunity for democratic and accountable decision making around housing and planning in London.

The LTF feels strongly that regional decision-making must be informed through bringing together evidence and experience from the local level. The ALG's Stakeholder Taskforce made a real attempt to do this in its *Through the eyes of Londoners* report.

Tenants must be involved at the beginning to ensure any new structures are democratic and accountable and responsive to the needs of all tenants. There must be proper engagement with tenants on the scope and range of the proposed new structures. Consultation on the new regional structure must include meetings with tenant organisations, including LTF. In terms of representation, the new regional structure for housing should include tenant representatives in sufficient numbers to avoid tokenism and isolation, provide direct representation for each sector and reflect the diversity of the tenant population, including BME tenants.

BME involvement is a huge area of work that is mentioned in the LHS and needs to be addressed within all new structures. An Equality Impact Assessment must be carried out on the new structures, involving mapping, research and consultation with BME tenants. The LTF has access to good practice among its members, examples of this include Hackney Tenant Convention employing a BME outreach worker and borough wide BME tenant organisations in Southwark and Croydon.

Consideration should be given within the new structure to a permanent policy sub-group on "community empowerment and diversity" to ensure all of these issues can be taken forward and to achieve effective communication between the sectors.

The complexity of developing regional tenant structures

Having accountable and democratic structures is a key issue for successful tenant involvement in regional bodies. Achieving this involves a great deal of work. Those living at street and estate level must set the priorities; there cannot be the imposition of structures on RSL tenants or private tenants without finding out what tenants want. It requires mapping, setting up structures, taking account of capacity issues, the size of the project and possible timescales. It takes time for people to feel they have ownership and the right to engage and each of these steps requires resources.

The LTF does not currently involve registered social landlord tenants but is keen to make links with RSL tenants who are affected by many of the same issues as council tenants. The LTF has already made some links with RSL and private tenants. For example, with the borough wide RSL tenants forum in Hammersmith and Forum and with the Guinness Trust London Tenants Federation. It also has links with Camden's private tenants

organisation, with whom it shares an office, one of only 2 such organisations in London. The LTF want to develop these links further.

The LTF has held discussions with key stakeholders to take the first steps in this process. This has led to terms of reference for a scoping study to map existing provision and make recommendations around setting up a regional RSL tenant structure. Key elements of which are as follows:

- What there is now (examining the number and variety of types of groups)
- How things will be in the future (if things are left as they are)
- What are the options to improve present arrangements
- Degrees of difficulty/risk
- Establishing long term commitment
- Growing the capacity of Community Groups
- Support needs
- Involving BME communities
- Equalities Impact Assessment
- Size of Project
- Timescales
- Funding requirements

The LTF does not want to lose its identity and focus and suggests a separate and distinct body for RSL tenants that would develop close links to the LTF. It is proposed LHF have close involvement in this piece of work as RSL landlords have a major contribution to make in achieving cross-London RSL tenant engagement. It would be beneficial for other key stakeholders to be involved.

LTF note the objective in the LHS to conduct an identical study including private sector tenants by GOL and the reference to a BME tenants study by the Housing Corporation. To provide linkages between these studies, and to involve key stakeholders in strategically supporting this work, the LTF propose the Housing Forum for London establish a Tenant Participation sub-group at this meeting, to oversee the delivery of the RSL Scoping Study, the private sector tenants research, and the BME tenants study.