

The Business Benefits of the Northern Ireland Housing Executive's Community Involvement Activities

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Executive Summary

Background: The Housing Executive and Community Involvement

With more than 88,000 residential properties and over 3,000 staff, the Housing Executive is one of the largest social landlords in the UK. The body has a statutory duty to consult its tenants on matters affecting their tenancies and believes that more involved communities are better informed and can:

- contribute to better decision-making;
- help improve services and standards locally; and
- develop their own skills and opportunities.

Since the 1980s, the Housing Executive has therefore encouraged residents and community groups to become more active in decision-making and to participate in the delivery of housing services. For a number of years, this involvement has been assisted by Supporting Communities, which the Housing Executive engages on an annual basis to provide support, advice, information and training to help community groups and residents get the most out of their involvement with the landlord. With the assistance of Supporting Communities, the Housing Executive has established a formal Housing Community Network (HCN) to ensure that residents and community associations have the opportunity to participate at local, area and regional level. In 2013 the Housing Executive spent just over £4 million on community initiatives including Community Involvement, Community Cohesion and Integration and Community Safety.

The Research: objectives and methods

Previous studies had illustrated the benefits of the Housing Executive's Community Involvement activity for the individuals and community groups involved, and independent assessors have noted the social, economic and environmental benefits arising from this sometimes-overlooked strand of the organisation's work (Customer Service Excellence assessment, 2015). However, less attention had been paid to identifying whether, and how, community involvement benefits the Housing Executive's business activity. In 2016, therefore, the Housing Executive commissioned the University of Westminster to carry out research on the benefits of community involvement activity in relation to issues such as:

- Tenant satisfaction levels;
- Expenditure;
- Service delivery; and
- Value for money.

In particular, the research focused on whether there was evidence that investment in community involvement:

- Contributes to increased levels of satisfaction with services;
- Can result in cost savings in the Housing Executive's business activity;
- Has led to process improvement in delivery of services; and/or
- Has had any wider organisational benefits for the Housing Executive.

The research used quantitative data (in particular the Housing Executive's annual *Continuous Tenant Omnibus Survey*, or 'CTOS') to analyse patterns, trends and correlations between resident engagement processes and performance improvements. In addition, qualitative analysis of responses gathered during nine semi-structured interviews and three focus groups provided an insight into the views of stakeholders including tenants and residents, Housing Executive staff and Board and the Department for Social Development (which subsequently became part of the Department for Communities).

Key findings

Tenant, resident and stakeholder views

- Respondents noted the Housing Executive's strong record of community engagement and the significant impact it had made in encouraging tenants and residents to participate in decision-making.
- Tenants and residents felt strongly that they made a positive contribution to the governance of the Housing Executive and that they themselves benefitted from their participation in terms of training, capacity building, and increased confidence.
- There was a sense, among both Housing Executive staff and tenants and residents, that community involvement has helped improve relationships between the organisation and its customers, enabling each to gain a better understanding of the challenges and issues faced by the other and the need to look for solutions that benefit both.

The value of involvement: consultation and satisfaction

Statistical analysis of the data gathered by the Continuous Tenant Omnibus Survey (CTOS) over the four-year period between 2011 and 2014 showed that there were strong correlations between tenants' satisfaction with consultation and information received and their satisfaction with key aspects of the Housing Executive's work, including:

- Repairs;
- The work of the Housing Executive overall;
- Value for money for rent; and
- Respondent's neighbourhood as a place to live.

Taken together, the quantitative and qualitative findings show that investment in community involvement has benefitted the Housing Executive's business in four key ways, namely by helping the organisation to:

- identify needs;
- improve services;
- reduce costs; and
- develop communities (see infographic, p4).

Given the scale of both the Housing Executive's business and the community involvement activity facilitated by the body and its partners, it was beyond the scope of this relatively small study to definitively quantify all the impacts and outcomes of changes that have been made and/or initiatives undertaken as a direct result of the Housing Executive's investment in community involvement.

However, it was very clear that both tenants and residents and Housing Executive staff are convinced that the ongoing consultation and interaction enabled by the community involvement framework play a key role in supporting the Housing Executive to deliver its services in ways that are more efficient and – importantly – better-tailored to the needs of its tenants and residents.

The Four Key Business Benefits of the Housing Executive's Community Involvement activity

KEY BUSINESS BENEFITS OF COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

The research identified **four key ways** in which the Housing Executive benefits from its investment in community involvement:



IDENTIFYING NEEDS

- Ensuring that strategies and policies meet the needs of tenants and residents
- Taking account of the views of 'hard to reach' groups
- Gathering feedback and local knowledge

The proportion of tenants who felt the Housing Executive consults well or very well increased from 72% in 2011 to 76% in 2014



IMPROVING SERVICES

- Improved working practices (e.g. inter-agency initiatives)
- Recommendations for changes to repair and maintenance services
- Improved communication (e.g. revised wording in standard letters, recommended by tenants)

Satisfaction with the repairs service increased from 76% in 2011 to 80% in 2014



REDUCING COSTS

- Community activity creates a sense of pride and ownership, which in turn makes areas more attractive places to live: lower void levels lead to reduced costs
- A more consultative approach to Change of Tenancy repairs helped reduce wasted expenditure by ensuring that work carried is in line the wishes of the prospective tenant
- Instinctive sense that community involvement helps reduce anti-social behaviour and improve community safety, reducing associated costs

90% of tenants were satisfied that their rent provided value for money



DEVELOPING COMMUNITIES

- Tenants' and residents' capacity to contribute to improvements in the Housing Executive's business is enhanced by engagement with their peers and the wider housing and community sector
- Improved community relations and cohesion help to build the trust that enables the Housing Executive and its partners to address the lasting impacts of the conflict in Northern Ireland

In 2014, 94% of tenants were satisfied with their neighbourhood as a place to live

Conclusions

Taken together, the quantitative and qualitative data suggest that community involvement activities have helped the Housing Executive to improve its housing services and to out-perform most of its peers in the UK. Against a difficult background of community tensions, a legacy of conflict and pressure on resources, it is a credit to the staff and residents of the Northern Ireland Housing Executive that the commitment and energy devoted to community involvement is reflected in high levels of satisfaction with involvement and service provision. Focus groups with engaged tenants demonstrated the value they place on both general consultation and specialist forums addressing the specific concerns of 'hard to reach' groups. Community engagement work has helped the Housing Executive develop a rich understanding of local community needs and the organisation is developing a genuine culture of engagement and consultation that can continue to drive further improvements in coming years.

Tenants' relatively high levels of satisfaction with their neighbourhood as a place to live, and the increasing proportion of tenants who were very satisfied with their neighbourhood, suggest that resident engagement has played a role in developing cohesive communities. Furthermore, the qualitative and quantitative data indicate that community involvement activity has played an important part in developing communities.

Our research findings show that the Housing Executive has a strong culture of participation. The evidence demonstrates strong progress in performance in housing and neighbourhood management services; this progress is particularly impressive given that the starting point for the study was already a strong baseline of effective overall performance in comparison to leading peer organisations and the challenging context of inter-communal tensions. One of our key findings was the way that participation can help provide linkages and dialogue between different community groups through greater engagement and debate, identifying common problems and developing mutually agreed solutions to the housing and neighbourhood problems facing communities in Northern Ireland. However, improvements arising from community involvement are incremental and contingent on circumstances, as well as being volatile in situations where tensions remain. There are therefore three key messages about future investment in community involvement:

THE VALUE OF FUTURE INVESTMENT IN COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT



It is important to maintain a strong commitment to consultation as a permanent feature of the 'tenant offer', as the data suggest it is a key driver in the continuous improvement of other services.



Tenants who have come to value their engagement tend to be highly sensitive to any attempts to reduce commitments in this area.



There is a strong *business* as well as *social* case for community involvement and the Housing Executive should be supported in developing this very important area of work.

INTRODUCTION

Background

An important theme in UK housing practice has been a need to involve residents in service delivery and to enable local communities to exercise an influence in decision-making processes. Within the housing sector, interest has been enshrined in the concept of ‘co-regulation’ between service providers and residents through tenant scrutiny and other mechanisms for service delivery (Centre for Public Scrutiny, 2012). At the same time housing providers face an increased need to secure value for money and service efficiencies at a time of significant resource constraint. These demands can often conflict with priorities to facilitate accountability, promote transparency and establish a commitment to resident empowerment.



The overall aim of this research study was to explore the business benefits of the Northern Ireland Housing Executive’s community involvement activity, in terms of impacts on issues such as satisfaction levels, expenditure, service delivery and value for money.

The Northern Ireland context

Although sometimes viewed as ‘a place apart’ (Murphy, 1978) from the rest of the UK, Northern Ireland is faced with similar housing and social policy challenges. Housing shortages, stock condition concerns, social deprivation, poverty and public expenditure constraints are equally relevant issues within all parts of the UK. The governance of housing in Northern Ireland is, however, distinctive in so far as the social rented stock is not dominated by local authorities or housing associations (as in the rest of the UK) but primarily by the Northern Ireland Housing Executive which, with around 88,000 properties and over 3,000 staff, is one of the largest social landlords in the UK. Housing associations are responsible for development of all new social housing and have a growing but limited role by comparison, with a total stock of around 35,000 self-contained properties at March 2015.

A further distinctive feature of the Northern Ireland context is the level of division within neighbourhoods according to religious affiliation (community background). It has been estimated that around 35 to 40% of the population live in completely segregated neighbourhoods (Hughes et. al., 2007). On Housing Executive estates this is much higher at 80-90%, and the Housing Executive owns 20 of the 88 ‘peace walls’ in Belfast. The organisation continues to deal with the effects of the conflict, having responsibility for a range of issues including:

- Repairing bomb and riot damage for all tenures;
- Dealing with intimidation that results in homelessness;
- Operating the Scheme for Purchase of Evacuated Dwellings (SPED);

- Operating security schemes including the Hate Incident Practical Action (HIPA) scheme; the Protection of Private Properties at Interfaces (POPPI) scheme; interface adjustments and individual security measures to the homes of tenants under threat; and, in partnership with the Department of Justice, delivery of the ‘normalisation programme’ which provides alternative style security works to Housing Executive and private properties at interface locations where walls are being re-modelled.

Following the establishment of devolved government in 1998, responsibility for housing policy and strategy lies with the Department for Communities (DfC; formerly the Department for Social Development or DSD), which has ultimate responsibility for provision of funding for housing in Northern Ireland. The Northern Ireland Housing Executive (originally established in 1971) has responsibility for a wide range of housing functions, including calculating housing need, administration of the common waiting list for social housing, and managing its own stock as well as the Social Housing Development Programme and the Supporting People programme.

The Housing Executive and Community Involvement

The Housing Executive has a statutory duty to consult residents on matters affecting their tenancies and since the 1980s it has encouraged residents and community groups to become more active in decision-making and to participate in the delivery of housing services. The objective of community involvement is to encourage direct involvement in everyday issues that affect residents and related activities include research, consultation and encouraging the participation of a range of stakeholders. The Housing Executive believes that ‘more involved communities are better informed, can contribute to better decision-making, help improve services and standards locally and develop their own skills and opportunities’ (www.nihe.gov.uk/index/community/get_involved/community_involvement_strategy.htm).

Community engagement activities are assisted by Supporting Communities, previously known as the Northern Ireland Tenants Action Project (NITAP), via a service level agreement (SLA) which is agreed on a yearly basis. This body is an independent training and advocacy organisation designed to provide support, advice, information and training to community groups, residents, and voluntary and statutory bodies. The objective of this agency is to encourage establishment of new groups and to develop knowledge, expertise and skills to enable effective participation. Supporting Communities helps to develop policy, encourages the sharing of good practice and offers training and funding opportunities.

With the assistance of Supporting Communities, the Housing Executive established a formal Housing Community Network (HCN) to ensure that residents and community associations are given full opportunities to participate at different district, area and central levels throughout Northern Ireland. Activities include estate inspections, community navigator initiatives (providing bespoke support – e.g. supporting older people) for new tenants, pre-tenancy workshops and mystery shopper exercises. The governance of the HCN has evolved during its lifetime to date, but at the time of the research the main elements were:

- A **Central Housing Forum** that includes members nominated from 13 Area Scrutiny Panels plus one member representing each of the 'hard to reach' groups: the Disability Forum, Youth Forum and Rural Residents' Forum (see 'Engagement with hard to reach groups', below). The central body (chaired by a resident representative) deals with the policy and practice of the Housing Executive and other relevant organisations. It advises on policy and procedure and considers implications for local communities, individual residents and other bodies.
- Thirteen **Area Scrutiny Panels** (one for each Housing Executive administrative Area) which seek to ensure a customer focus in the organisation's work at local level by ensuring that the Housing Executive: is accountable to tenants for service delivery; continuously seeks customers' views and strives to improve service delivery; and trains and empowers residents and staff.
- Local/District **Housing Forums**, which represent estate or community level associations. The local/district forum discusses service standards, service delivery and housing related issues, including identifying and sharing best practice. Local housing managers can provide materials and equipment to community groups – for example for estate cleaning and garden maintenance. Community groups can lease properties for community activities and training and community development programmes are provided.

ENGAGEMENT WITH HARD TO REACH (OR 'EASY TO IGNORE') GROUPS

The Housing Executive works through service level agreements with representative forums to help ensure that services take account of the needs of all within society:



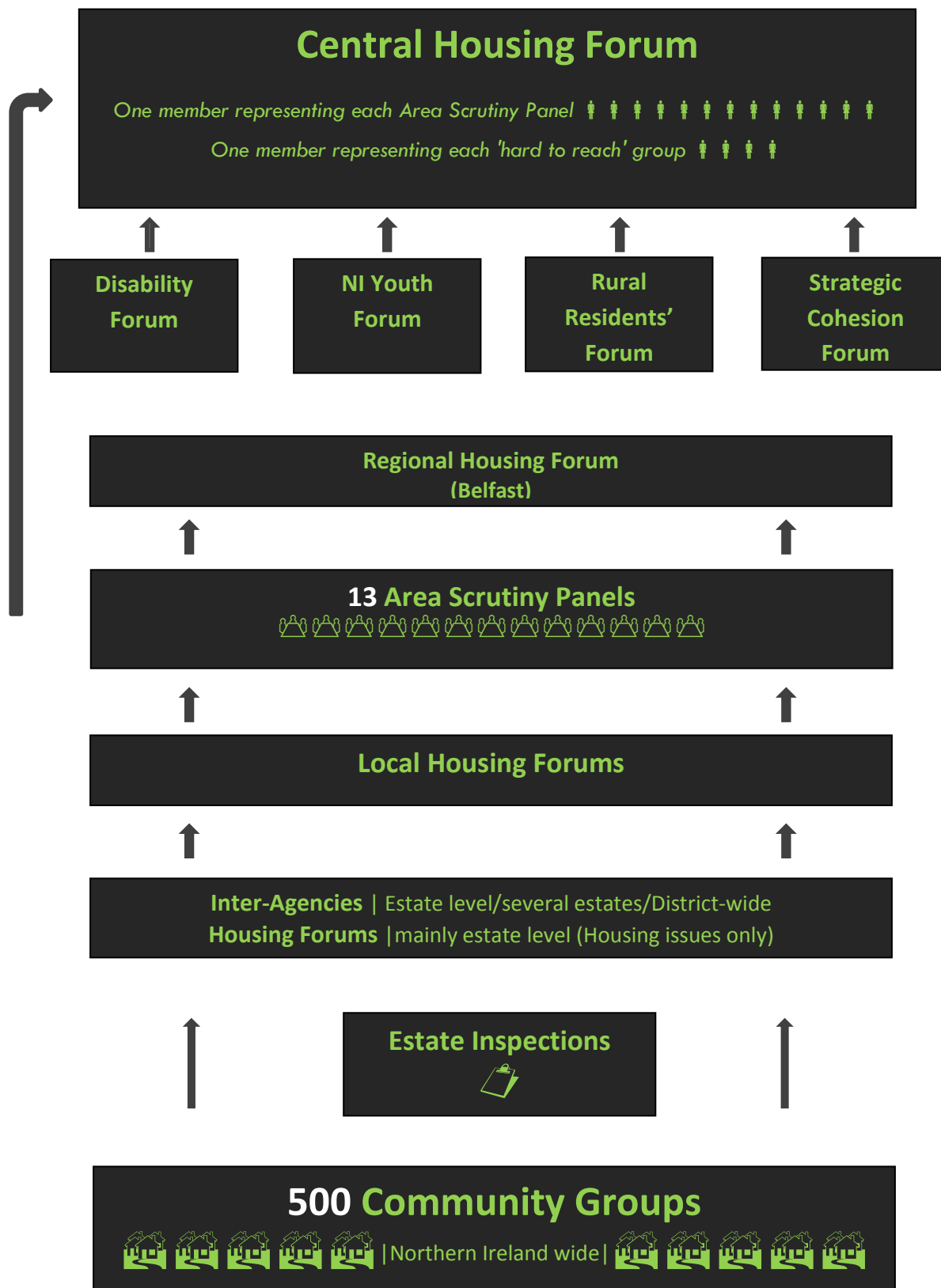
The **Youth Forum** (in association with the Northern Ireland Youth Forum) focuses on issues affecting young people, such as the impact of debt



The **Disability Forum** (established in 2011, in conjunction with Disability Action) considers the housing services provided by the Executive including people with sensory, physical, learning, hidden, mental health and multiple disabilities;



The **Rural Residents' Forum** (in association with the Rural Community Network) ensures that all Housing Executive policies are 'future proofed' to meet the needs of residents within rural as well as urban neighbourhoods.



The HCN has also been involved in encouraging local community groups to develop their own social enterprises and helping to empower housing and voluntary sector staff to support the community sector. Examples of support include the following:

The Housing Community Network: PROVIDING SUPPORT TO EMPOWER COMMUNITIES



Social enterprise projects, including community centres, community enterprise workspace centres, allotments, gyms, out of school clubs, community associations and community cafes



Capacity building and digital inclusion initiatives to encourage effective engagement



Provision of **premises and community lettings** to help groups develop community and interagency work



Development of an **Estate Inspection Toolkit** to enable agencies and communities to engage with each other



Facilitation of an **annual community conference** to help groups share best practice



Provision of a range of **facilities** such as photocopying and mailing, especially for groups in the early stages of formation

The Housing Community Network Annual Report 2014 provided examples of projects in which community groups had generated resources and provided local services and programmes within their communities.

Thus, in 2013/14 Supporting Communities helped groups involved with the HCN to source almost **£2.5m in funding** and provided support to more than **550 community groups**. It also: facilitated more than **200 interagency meetings** across Northern Ireland incorporating representatives from the voluntary and statutory sectors; provided administrative support; and created over 500 'digital champions' to provide basic online skills.

The HCN was involved in developing an action plan contained in the community involvement strategy report 2014-2017 to ensure that strategies effectively reflected community aspirations and support (Housing Executive, 2014a).

"Landlord Services has the most interactive and thorough involvement with its customers through the HCNs of any organisation that the assessor has encountered"

Customer Service Excellence Assessment
Report for Landlord Services (2017)



Tenant representatives meet with Housing Executive and Supporting Communities staff, Mid Ulster

From 2004 the HCN was supplemented by an Inter Community Network (ICN) with a remit to contribute to a *Building Good Relations* strategy (NIHE, 2005). This network operated independently from the HCN, and was subsequently reviewed and reframed as the Strategic Cohesion Forum (SCF) in line with the Northern Ireland Executive's *Together Building a United Community* (TBUC) strategy. The Housing Executive has also established **Community Cohesion and Integration** and **Community Safety** Strategies to involve tenants in scrutiny panels and to assist in implementing the wider Community Involvement Strategy. Described as the 'jewel in the crown' of the Housing Executive's work (Customer Service Excellence Assessment), this latter strategy aims to achieve effective and active involvement with communities to give residents influence in decision-making and in making their neighbourhoods better places to live. The objective is to assist communities to overcome sectarian issues, and to address problems of poverty and crime. Through the work of the Housing Community Network, the strategy has helped to generate engagement in Community Safety Partnerships, undertake work in developing community cohesion and encourage involvement in tenant scrutiny panels (NIHE, 2014).

In 2013 the Housing Executive spent just over £4 million on community involvement initiatives.

Independent assessment (from benchmarking exercises) has identified a range of benefits from this investment. The Housing Executive was awarded the Customer Service Excellence Standard in 2013 by an independent assessor who noted that community involvement activity had ensured wide acceptance in the Housing Executive of the importance of:

- customer views
- understanding impact on customers
- customer feedback and
- customer satisfaction and targeting of services (Housing Executive, 2014, p.29)

The most recent Customer Service Excellence Assessment Report for Landlord Services (January 2017) noted that Community Involvement plays a valuable role in bringing communities together and in ensuring that tenants and residents have close connections with Housing Executive staff in their area. It also highlighted the knowledge and enthusiasm of Area Scrutiny Panel members and the role of the Panels in helping the organisation gain a better understanding of tenants' and other customers' needs and requirements, contributing to improved satisfaction with services in spite of budget pressures and staff reductions.

Successes have included partnership working in developing social economy projects, introducing Community Service Agreements to create employment opportunities in areas of multiple deprivation and a range of capacity building projects to develop skills and abilities. The development of a Social Housing Enterprise Strategy has also channelled investment as part of the Housing Executive's overall vision in which housing plays its part in creating a peaceful, inclusive, prosperous and fair society. Research conducted by the Northern Ireland Housing Executive on community involvement in the HCN in 2007 demonstrated that resident involvement can increase community groups' capacity and social capital, defined as an ability to generate linkages within and between community groups. As Muir (2011) has commented:

It was clear that participation in the Central HCN did enhance bridging and linking social capital, and that additional bonding social capital at the local level was also generated. The Central HCN was highly valued by its members, who enjoyed participating and appreciated the commitment of their colleagues and of Housing Executive and NITAP staff (p.973).

In addition, community groups indicated that they felt empowered through their membership of the HCN; there was a sense that ownership of local issues had increased and representatives were able to identify matters on which they thought they could make a real impact. Further research in 2010 indicated that membership of the HCN gave community groups and individuals a sense of having an increased influence on issues such as anti-social behaviour, response maintenance and estate management. Other studies have pointed to the importance of resident involvement in developing social cohesion. For example:

In order for an area to be regarded as truly mixed, there must be social interaction between the two religious groups. A useful and necessary first step is the facilitation and encouragement of engagement between the different communities (Gray, McNulty and Keenan, 2009, p.350).

Voluntary Community Involvement Case Study: Valerie Rooney

A Housing Executive tenant in Newry for 35 years, Valerie has given countless hours – on a voluntary basis – to shape and scrutinise the services the Housing Executive provides. She was selected by members of the Central Housing Community Network to represent the views of tenants during a review of maintenance services.



Valerie was involved from the beginning of the project, sitting on the project board and the evaluation panel. She took part in site visits to all the contractors as well as working with other network members to ensure a focus on delivering the best service for tenants. 'It was a very intense experience and I didn't realise how in-depth it would be to appoint a contractor. The tender approach was very rigorous and thorough. I was particularly impressed with the key focus of putting the customer first. I think the appointment system will prove to be a key change. For busy households it means that you know when to expect the contractor and can make arrangements to let them in to carry out the works.'

In 2017, in recognition for her invaluable expertise and her support to the Housing Executive, Valerie was nominated for the CIH Northern Ireland Housing Hero award.

RESEARCHING THE BUSINESS BENEFITS OF COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

As a response to this emerging agenda, housing organisations in the voluntary and statutory sectors have introduced a range of mechanisms and processes that aim to achieve an effective balance between ensuring resident engagement in decision-making processes, retaining a competitive advantage and communicating effectively with all stakeholders. Housing organisations face significant challenges in balancing these pressures where there are growing demands to meet housing need, to retain a development programme and to ensure a high standard of service delivery to existing residents. The housing sector faces additional challenges, marked by high levels of vulnerability of residents and the need to ensure staff commitment to organisational priorities within an environment of resource scarcity.

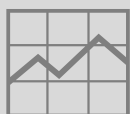
Whilst resident involvement has been widely seen as beneficial to both landlords and tenants, there has until recently been little firm evidence of the business benefits that such activity can offer. However, a number of studies have shown that community engagement can bring considerable benefits for housing providers and other organisations. The Chartered Institute of Housing (CIH, 2008) has endorsed the importance of effective resident involvement in improving decision-making and the Centre for Public Scrutiny (CfPS, 2011) has provided good practice recommendations to demonstrate how resident scrutiny can benefit organisations.

Recent research has highlighted value for money savings (for example Hood, 2010) through effective involvement of residents. Studies have included research undertaken by Bliss et al (2015), which indicated that housing associations can benefit from several million pounds in savings through resident involvement, and a case study of a large London-based housing association (AmicusHorizon Ltd.), which identified marked improvements in performance and efficiency savings following the introduction of a 'co-regulatory' governance structure (Manzi, Simpson and Bailey, 2015).

Other studies have attempted to quantify the social impact from community investment (see for example Trotter et al. 2014). As Warrington and Davies (2007) contend, 'making services and decisions accountable to, and contestable by, residents, and responding to the resident voice' are vital to 'achieving and maintaining excellence in housing' (p.11). At the same time it is important to note that: community engagement should be inclusive; decision-making should lead to exercising genuine influence; communication strategies must be thorough; and residents should have sufficient capacity for their involvement to be meaningful (Wilson and Wilde, 2003, p.7). To what extent are these processes applicable to a Northern Ireland context and how can such business benefits be identified in work undertaken by the Northern Ireland Housing Executive?

Northern Ireland research: Methods

This study utilised a range of methods in order to provide both *qualitative* and *quantitative* evidence for the benefits that community involvement in decision-making can offer to the Housing Executive. The study drew on detailed analysis of existing (quantitative and qualitative) data collected by the Housing Executive in the form of resident surveys, internal reports and other relevant (internal and external) documents.



Information from the Continuous Tenant Omnibus Survey (CTOS) from 2011 to 2014 was analysed in order to identify **patterns, trends and correlations** between resident engagement processes and performance improvements. Detailed data was extracted for a four-year period (chosen as this provided the most effective comparable data) to determine:

- *The extent of community engagement;*
- *Levels of resident satisfaction (with service delivery and with the process of consultation);*
- *Analysis of influence in decision-making; and*
- *Identifiable savings in services*



The quantitative data was supplemented by detailed qualitative analysis of responses from a range of stakeholders with an interest in community engagement. This section of the research consisted of **nine semi-structured interviews** and **three focus groups** (conducted by Ulster University) including tenants and residents and staff within the Housing Executive.

The purpose of the interviews was to determine:

- *How residents were involved in decision-making processes;*
- *Areas of the organisation in which residents were most effectively engaged; and*
- *How resident engagement could be developed most effectively.*



The three focus groups were conducted with staff, residents and members of task groups (including the Central Housing Forum, the Rural Residents' Forum and the Disability Forum).

The purpose of the focus groups was to:

- *Provide collective discussion and evaluation of existing initiatives;*
- *Determine how service delivery could best be improved by involving residents; and*
- *Consider how resident involvement could be extended to other areas of service delivery.*

FINDINGS

1. The Housing Executive and Community Involvement

As already outlined, the Housing Executive has a strong record of community involvement, developed through the Housing Community Network (at various levels) with the assistance of Supporting Communities. The work that the Housing Executive has undertaken was acknowledged as making a significant impact on the way that communities had been encouraged to participate in decision-making. A member of staff representing the Department for Social Development (DSD – now the Department for Communities) told us the Housing Executive had ‘a very good reputation’ partly because of the structure of their tenant base, but also because ‘they have seen [community engagement] as something that they need to do’ to be a responsive landlord (interview). Following the implementation of the tenant participation initiative, ‘the level of engagement we had right across the piece in developing that strategy...was a very positive experience’ (Interview).

In similar ways, our discussions with Central Housing Forum members highlighted how their experience had been rewarding. The fact that the Forum was chaired by Community representatives was seen as a positive opportunity to engage with other groups and different communities. A disparate and broad representation of different groups was noted at Central HCN, tenant scrutiny panels and local inter-agency meetings, as mentioned in Muir’s (2011) study of community involvement. Members also noted the positive contribution from the Housing Executive at Inter-Agency Working Groups, although support from other agencies was not consistent across the province. Members of the Central Housing Forum mentioned ‘positive and genuine’ engagement with the Housing Executive and commented on ‘energetic engagement’ with young people, disabled groups and residents in rural areas through the established Forums.

Supporting Communities was thought to have made a positive contribution to supporting resident involvement through the recruitment of liaison officers across Northern Ireland, and in running formal training programmes. Residents felt that they made a positive contribution to the governance of the Housing Executive and that they were able to benefit individually through capacity building, training and generating the confidence to engage with staff, senior management and Housing Executive Board members. Support and training provided by Supporting Communities were seen as crucial in achieving these objectives. Investment in training was therefore thought to pay a strong dividend.

Residents felt that they made a positive contribution to the governance of the Housing Executive.

Respondents were conscious of the many challenges of resident involvement, which were particularly acute within an environment containing segregated communities and high potential for inter-communal conflict. Nevertheless, the fact that communities were able to meet without preconceptions was thought to be very important. As a representative for the DSD commented, ‘All the effort we put in before the tenant participation document was produced involved starting out with a blank piece of paper. This could have been difficult but it worked.’ (Interview) This view was qualified by an acknowledgement that the development of community engagement could often be a slow process: ‘Sometimes we can go five steps back and one step forward, then six steps forward and one back – so we are making progress’ (Interview).

2. The Value of Participation

The next sections consider the specific benefits that community engagement brings to the Housing Executive. These are defined as:

- identifying needs;
- improving services;
- reducing costs; and
- developing communities.



IDENTIFYING NEEDS

Identifying Needs: Interview and Focus Group Feedback

The development of community engagement rests on the assumption that drawing on the knowledge and expertise of those most closely affected by decisions ensures that services are designed to meet needs in an appropriate way. Community representatives who took part in our research expressed satisfaction that they had been consulted by the Housing Executive and that their role was being taken seriously. As one respondent commented ‘we wouldn’t be here if we didn’t think we were involved’. Participants at the Disability Forum were adamant that their contribution had been crucial in developing understanding of their specific needs. For example, their knowledge and insight helped professional staff understand issues with greater clarity:

‘We wouldn’t be here if we didn’t think we were involved’
(Housing Community Network)

...there are some people who just don’t know how to start off a conversation with somebody who’s disabled. They tend to see the disability rather than the person, and our point was to say, it’s the *person*. You know, there’s disability, but that person has *ability*, and you have to understand that.
(Disability Forum)

Respondents from the Disability Forum outlined the extent of change that had taken place in the way that the Housing Executive worked with communities. For example:

...in the past things would normally be decided top down, but now it’s bottom up, and this is the way we work here because we’re the people that are on the coal face with the disabilities who, through common sense, can see things that the Housing Executive can’t see, and we’re not backward in coming forward and letting them know where it is. (Disability Forum)

The involvement of a wide range of groups in decision-making was also identified by professionals as particularly important in determining policies and strategies. As one Area Manager commented ‘we can

ascertain whether the service is meeting the needs of our client group and very vulnerable communities and that we're dealing with deprivation' (Area Manager).

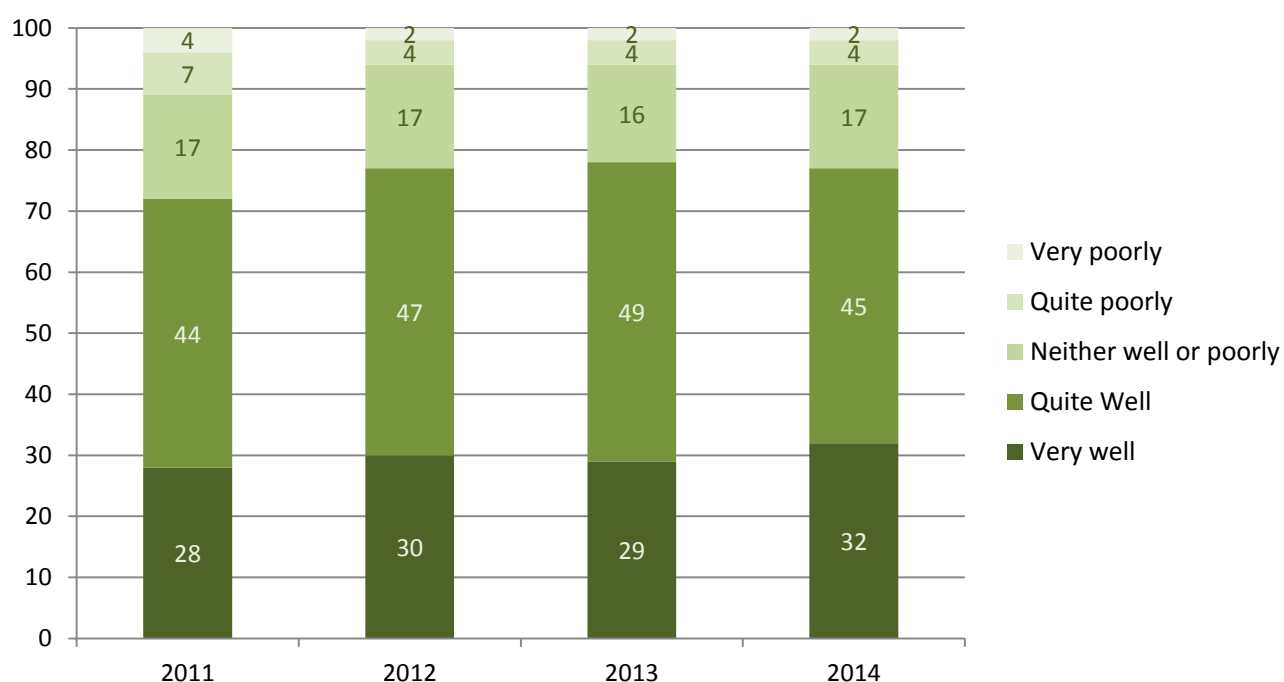
Community representatives were also keen to stress the way that relationships between professionals and staff had improved and that the local knowledge, experience, expertise and level of local contacts contained within communities were essential in identifying potential problems and offering possible solutions. As one interviewee explained 'I think the Housing Executive are now realising that 'these people on the ground are invaluable to us'. We know something before it's going to go down, put it like that. We know exactly what's going on in the area' (Disability Forum).

Identifying Needs: CTOS/HouseMark Analysis

In carrying out this research, we were fortunate to have access to the very rich data collected by the Continuous Tenant Omnibus Survey (CTOS), which interviews around 3,400 Housing Executive tenants each year. In addition, the Housing Executive is a partner in HouseMark's benchmarking group for social landlords with more than 20,000 homes, allowing an annual comparison of key performance indicators with its peers in Great Britain. CTOS and HouseMark data were used to complement the qualitative data gathered through interviews and focus groups.

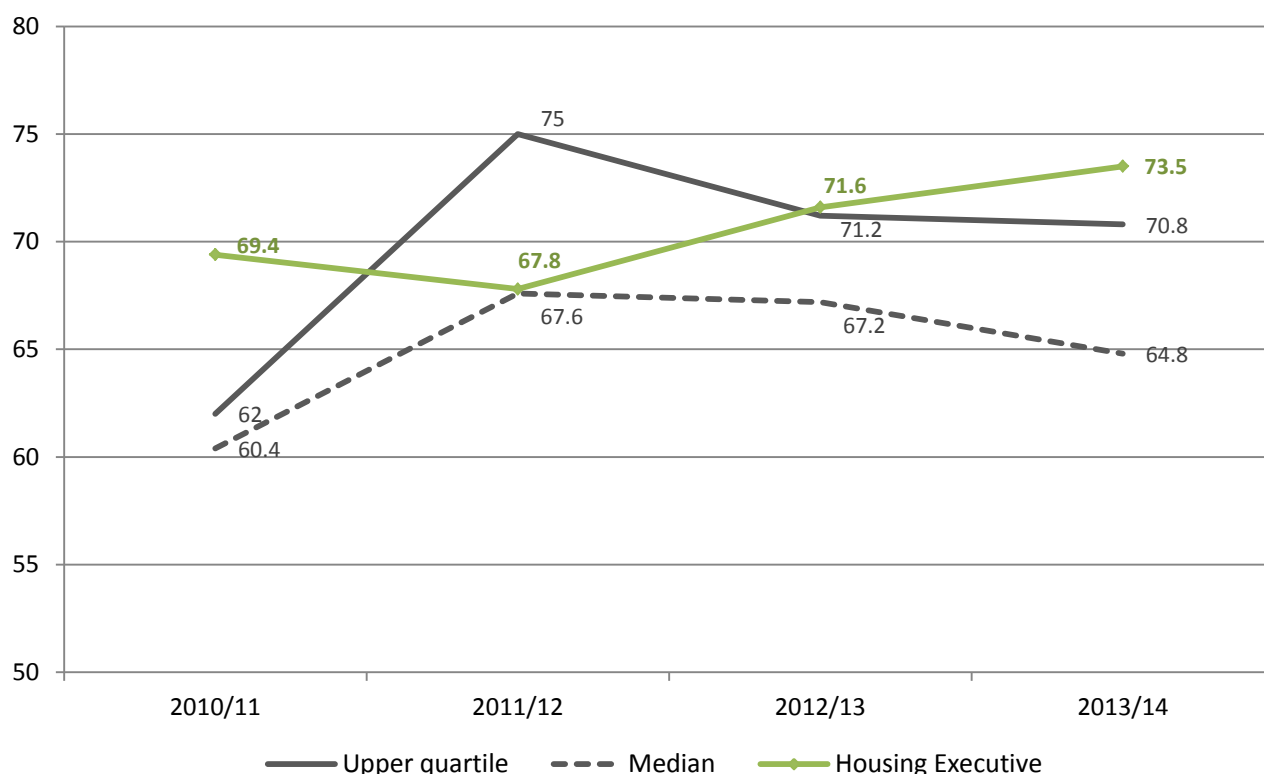
The emphasis on improved consultation with all residents is reflected in the responses to the CTOS, in which tenants report increasing levels of satisfaction with the Executive's consultation arrangements. The proportion of respondents who felt the Housing Executive conducts consultation well or very well increased from 72% in 2011 to 77% in 2014 (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Tenants' views on how well or poorly they were consulted by the Housing Executive, 2011-2014 (%) (*n=3,400 annually*)



The quality of the Housing Executive's consultation was rated highly by tenants compared with other large social landlords, with the organisation returning to the upper quartile for resident satisfaction in HouseMark's benchmarking club for landlords with more than 20,000 homes (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Residents' satisfaction that their views are taken into account (%) (HouseMark, 2010/11-2013/14)



It is difficult to compare the Housing Executive's per capita costs on resident engagement and involvement with other landlords, for two reasons. First, a change in the way costs are allocated between the Executive's budget heads means additional items have been charged to engagement in 2013/4 (Figure 3). Second, other landlords use different criteria when calculating their own engagement costs. Perhaps the fairest assessment is that the Housing Executive's costs have compared well with other large landlords in the past, but that comparative costs for resident engagement need to be treated with caution. In any case, the unit costs of resident engagement need to be considered alongside the Housing Executive's low costs in other aspects of tenant management (Figure 4). Combining these two elements means the combined costs of tenant services are highly competitive in comparison with other large landlords.

Figure 3: Resident Involvement cost per household (£) (HouseMark, 2010/11-2013/14)

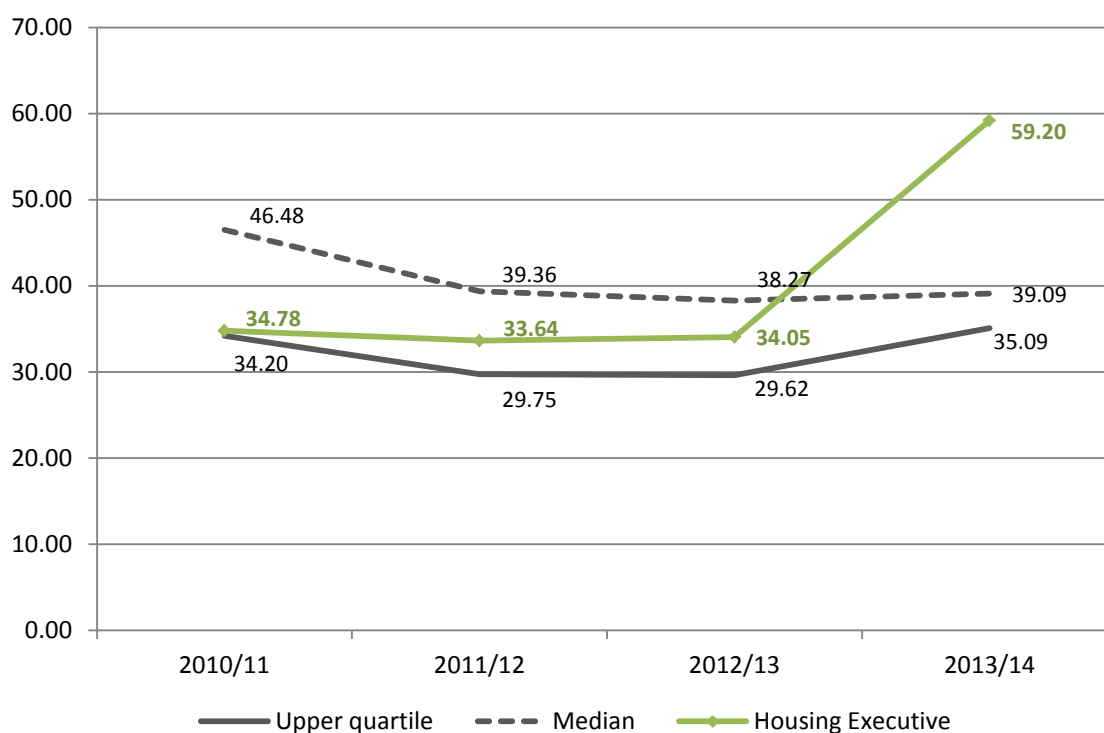
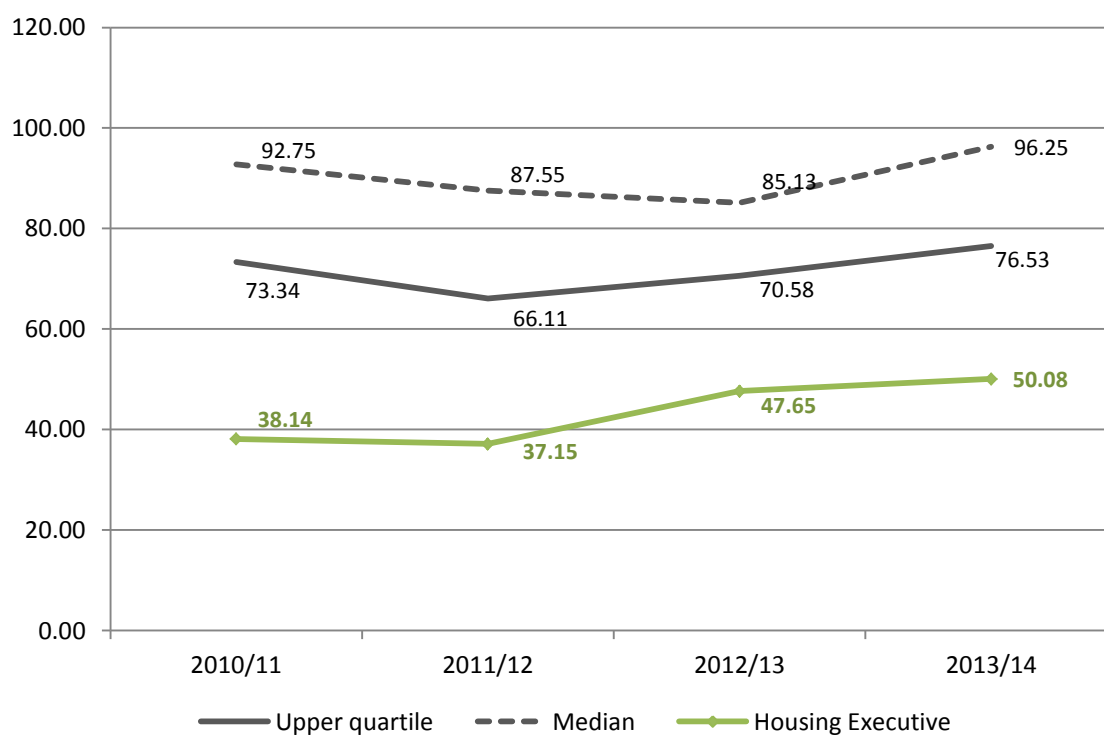


Figure 4: Other tenant management costs per household (£) (HouseMark, 2010/11-2013/14)





IMPROVING SERVICES

Improving Services: Interview and Focus Group Feedback

An important business benefit of community engagement has been in demonstrating how the input of local groups can lead to better quality service delivery (a feature demonstrated in other studies – see for example Bliss et.al, 2016). The idea that communities were able to help improve service delivery was firmly shared by respondents and came through strongly in the qualitative research; as one commented: ‘we’re a valuable asset to anybody and I don’t mind telling people that’ (Disability Forum).

There were a number of different ways in which the involvement of local groups was perceived to benefit and improve services provided by the Housing Executive. One was in developing **improved working practice** through more effective partnership arrangements. For example:

we have an inter-agency [forum]; we’re lucky enough that ours works really, really well and we actually sit with Housing Executive, council, police, Transport Northern Ireland, and we’re able to bring all our local issues to the table and it’s unbelievable how well it works. We’re going out on a big massive estate inspection and each one of these public bodies comes out with us to the local estates... That is *major*, for ordinary wee community people to be fit to be involved in that, so they’re actually listening and they’re empowering the wee local groups (resident).

A second important area was demonstrating that engagement could offer **improvements across the different regions** and was not limited to one geographical area. A respondent from the Disability Forum expressed the benefits as follows:

...we’re coming from all over the province. So, it’s not just a Belfast-based opinion, you know – we go beyond the Belfast opinion, which is a wee bugbear of mine, that quite often other communities get left out; there may be decisions made that we have no influence over, but we have the *capacity* to affect change on those decisions to the betterment of everybody and anybody (Disability Forum).

A further benefit of community engagement was the notion that **success was self-fulfilling** in the sense that the more effective the process was, the more people would wish to participate in meetings and other activities. This idea was stated as follows:

If there’s problems that they need dealt with, be it repairs, be it whatever it is, people’s reluctance will be overcome if they get results from being in contact with the Housing Executive... whenever they saw that the Housing Executive actually were serious about trying to address problems and they came on board with that, *then* people wanted to become involved. (Resident)

This raised an important point – that for engagement to be successful there needed to be a **discernible outcome** from the process. Specific areas where services benefitted were also identified, such as in the reduction of void periods. Other examples included community groups helping to ensure that residents did not refuse to have their property included in an improvement scheme:

In my area we have a lot of elderly people and they weren't sure about taking the schemes. When you went, they let a community representative meet the Housing Executive along with the residents and the majority of them took the renovations, so it means that the houses are sitting at a fabulous standard instead of people refusing to take it, so being involved in that has been fantastic (resident).

Community engagement can also help neighbourhoods in a more general sense, by assisting in environmental improvements, ensuring that residents can take **greater pride and ownership** in their local areas. Thus

A lot of us do environmental projects every year...we're lucky enough that the council gives us plants, but we have to do all the work. People actually want to live in the areas now because they're more attractive and that has to make a difference, does it not? And there's less voids, people are wanting to stay in an area (resident).

Involvement in reviewing the work of contractors had proved important in ensuring quality of work undertaken and increasing resident satisfaction with the repairs and maintenance service. As one tenant commented: 'we brought 17 recommendations to be included in the contract, and out of those 17, 15 of them are actually included in the new contracts, which was a big success for, you know, for local tenants' (resident). Involvement in the Repairs and Maintenance Project Board included reviewing contractors, evaluating tenders and undertaking visits; this forum was seen as particularly useful for residents and the organisation. In addition, residents were involved in other sub-groups and took responsibility for re-drafting standard letters to tenants, helping to improve communication processes and preventing misunderstandings.

'We brought 17 recommendations to be included in the [repairs and maintenance] contract, and out of those 17, 15 of them are actually included in the new contracts, which was a big success...for local tenants'

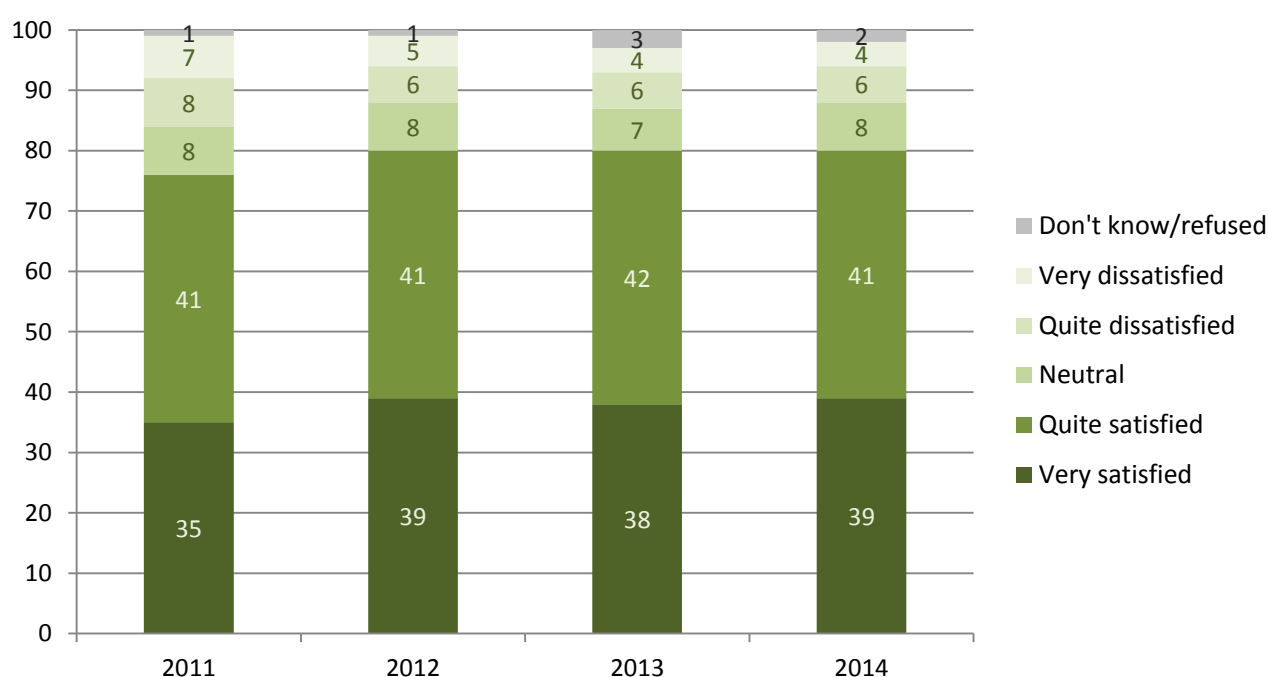
(Housing Community Network member)

Engaging communities in monitoring service delivery was seen as a significant development in **helping to empower local groups**. As one resident suggested 'the Scrutiny Panel, to me, is really, really getting the ordinary people involved' (resident). Residents thus played a vital role in quality assurance and in safeguarding policies. This notion of **providing constructive feedback** was noted by professional respondents as a key benefit:

When you're writing a policy and trying to take something forward: without the gift of being able to have the input from the community, who are going to be the *recipients*, almost, of your policies, frankly you would be in a never-ending loop of re-writing and reviewing. When you're doing...as policy makers, having the voice of the community right at that front end is invaluable in knowing that your policies are effective and right and relevant. Without that, then, you're going to have to just keep changing and changing and changing [NIHE].

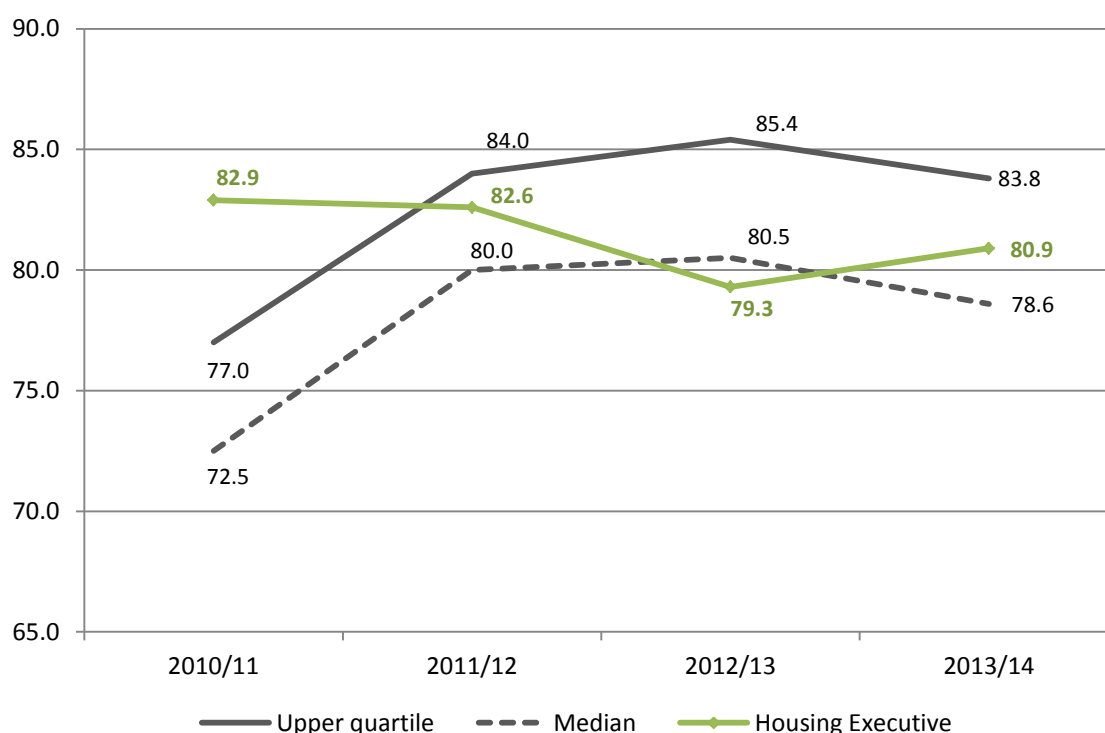
A key part of any programme of service improvement relates to customers' experiences and perceptions, and social housing is no exception. Increasing tenant satisfaction with *repairs* is always a challenge for housing organisations, and across the sector tenants consistently list repairs and maintenance as one of their main concerns. However, the Continuous Tenant Omnibus Survey shows steady improvements in Housing Executive tenants' evaluations of repairs to their homes, with 80% expressing satisfaction with repair provision in 2014 (up from 76% in 2011 – see Figure 5).

Figure 5: Satisfaction with repair services (%), CTOS: 2011-2014 (n=3,400 annually)



Although HouseMark's benchmarking data shows slightly different CTOS satisfaction scores for repairs (partly because Housemark allocates data to the financial year, while the CTOS attributes it to the calendar year and partly because the figures in this report are based on the *unweighted* responses of all 3,400 CTOS participants), it does generally show above average satisfaction scores compared with other large landlords. (The most noticeable feature in Figure 6 overleaf is actually the fluctuations in scores for the sector as a whole, shown by the movements in the median and upper quartile scores.)

Figure 6: Resident satisfaction with repairs and maintenance (HouseMark, 2010/11-2013/14)



It is possible to link good tenant consultation with improved perceptions of other housing services such as repairs through **statistical tests**. The CTOS data we examined shows very strong correlations between tenants' satisfaction with consultation and their satisfaction with other aspects of the Housing Executive's work. For example, while only 39% of all CTOS respondents were "very satisfied" with repairs in 2014, the figure rose to almost 70% among those residents who said they were "very well" consulted by the Housing Executive (Table 1).

Table 1: Satisfaction with how the Housing Executive deals with repairs among tenants who said they were very well consulted by the organisation (%)

Satisfaction with how the Housing Executive deals with repairs	2011	2012	2013	2014
Very satisfied	63.8	69.9	66.9	69.1
Fairly satisfied	24.6	20.9	22.1	20.8
Neutral	3.3	2.4	2.5	3.2
Fairly dissatisfied	4.7	3.0	3.3	3.6
Very dissatisfied	2.4	1.7	2.4	1.9

A similar pattern could be identified among residents who said the Housing Executive's consultation was "very poor": they also tended to be very unhappy about repairs (Table 2). In Tables 1 and 2 we have omitted the small proportion of residents who did not express a view on repairs.

Table 2: Satisfaction with how the Housing Executive deals with repairs among tenants who said they were very poorly consulted by the organisation (%)

Satisfaction with how the Housing Executive deals with repairs	2011	2012	2013	2014
Very satisfied	9.7	8.1	11.3	9.6
Fairly satisfied	26.6	18.9	14.5	11.0
Neutral	8.9	14.9	14.5	20.5
Fairly dissatisfied	14.5	20.3	19.4	20.5
Very dissatisfied	38.7	36.5	35.5	37.0

Analysis of statistical correlation: Spearman's rho

Where appropriate, we also analysed the statistical correlations between tenants' satisfaction with *participation, consultation and information* and satisfaction with key Housing Executive services, using *Spearman's rho*. Spearman's rho measures the strength of association of two variables, and can take values from +1 to -1. A positive value indicates a positive relationship between the two variables (i.e. when variable 'A' increases, variable 'B' also increases), while a negative value indicates a negative relationship. The closer the figure is to zero, the weaker the (positive or negative) relationship between the variables.

Given the patterns in Tables 1 and 2, it was no surprise to find extremely strong statistical correlations between tenants' satisfaction with the Housing Executive's consultation and their satisfaction with its repairs for all four years that we examined. We found even stronger correlations in the CTOS data between tenants' satisfaction with the information they received from the Housing Executive and their satisfaction with repairs (Table 3 overleaf)¹.

¹ With such large samples (3,400 respondents per year) we can accept Spearman's Ranked Correlation values higher than 0.2 as statistically significant at $\alpha=0.05$; in other words, there is only one chance in 20 that the relationship is a statistical accident. Values higher than 0.3 will be significant at $\alpha=0.001$, i.e. there is only one chance in 1,000 that the relationship is a spurious one.

Table 3: Correlations between tenants' satisfaction with participation, consultation and information, and satisfaction with repairs (Spearman's rho)

Satisfaction with:	2011	2012	2013	2014
(a) Participation	0.084	0.069	n/a	n/a
(b) Consultation	0.401	0.387	0.352	0.399
(c) Information	0.429	0.415	0.384	0.167

It is important to stress the limitations of correlations, which demonstrate the strength of any relationship between variables but cannot demonstrate causality (i.e. which variable is driving the relationship). We cannot use the correlations in the CTOS data to prove that consultation actually drives high satisfaction with repairs (since other factors, such as strategic decisions affecting all services, or even a “halo effect” as services improve across the board may also be playing a part), but we can state with a very high degree of confidence that those tenants who are satisfied with the Housing Executive's information and consultation are also more likely to be satisfied with its repairs service (and as we will see, other aspects of its service as well).

...we can state with a high degree of confidence that those tenants who are satisfied with the Housing Executive's information and consultation are also more likely to be satisfied with its repairs service.

Interestingly, when we examined the correlation between satisfaction with actual participation (e.g. respondents' attendance at meetings) and the repairs service (for the two years that this data was available) we did not find a statistically significant relationship (Table 3). We speculate that this may be because one-off events such as surgeries and drop-ins will often attract tenants who are dissatisfied with services, so that a participant may be very unhappy with a feature of the service but feel the actual event (the “participation” itself) was fine. We found a similar pattern of growing improvement in tenants' satisfaction with the Housing Executive's *overall service* (Figure 7). The Executive's scores in this area compare favourably with other large landlords (Figure 8).



'Welcome from Campsie Residents':

Making areas more attractive in partnership with communities by carrying out environmental improvements.

Figure 7: Satisfaction with the Housing Executive's overall service (%), CTOS: 2011-2014 (n=3,400 annually)

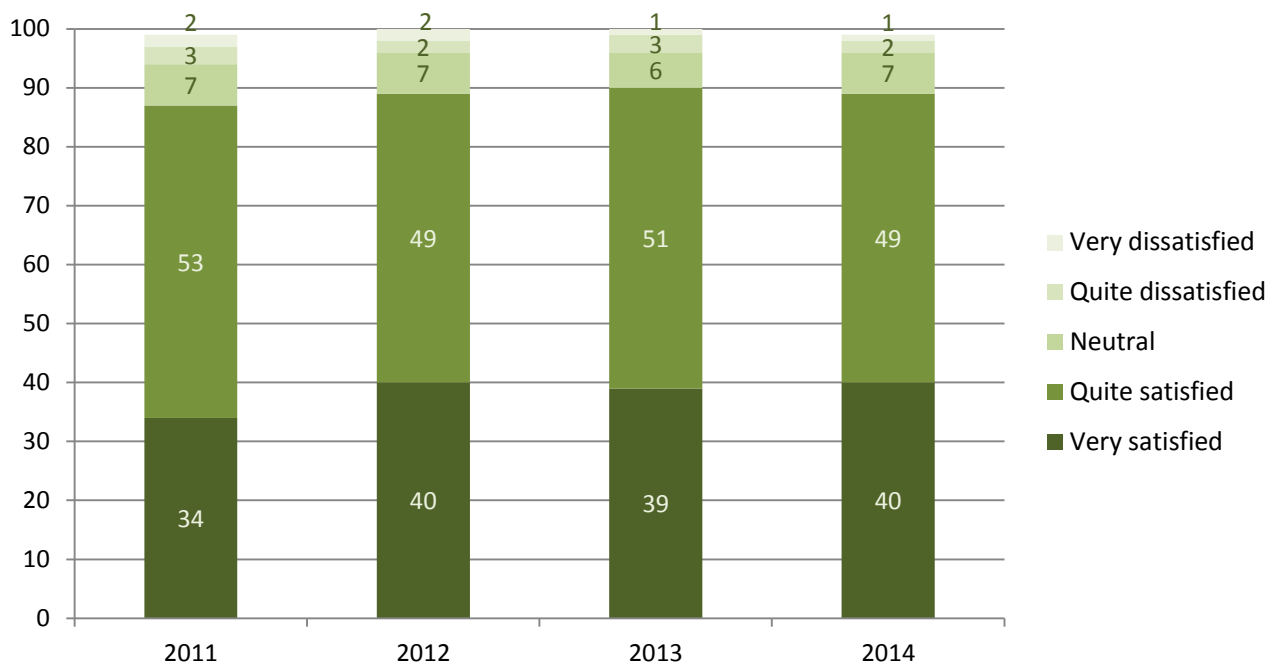
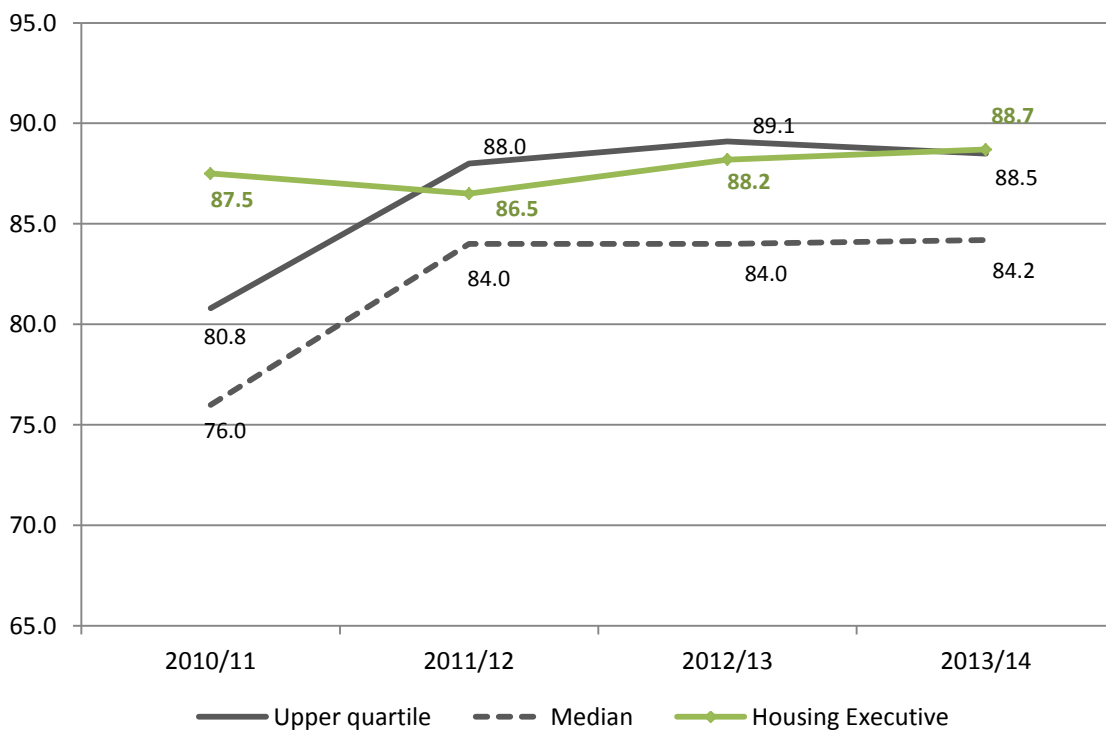


Figure 8: Satisfaction with overall service for large landlords (%) (HouseMark, 2010/11-2013/14)



Again, we found that tenants who were very satisfied with the Housing Executive's consultation were also much more likely to be satisfied with its overall service (Table 4).

Table 4: Satisfaction with the overall service provided by the Housing Executive for tenants who said they were very well consulted by the organisation (%)

Satisfaction with the overall service provided by the Housing Executive	2011	2012	2013	2014
Very satisfied	66.9	76.6	75.2	75.3
Fairly satisfied	30.4	20.8	22.1	23.4
Neutral	1.3	1.6	1.6	0.7
Fairly dissatisfied	0.8	0.8	0.8	0.2
Very dissatisfied	0.5	0.3	0.3	0.3

The correlation between satisfaction with consultation and information and overall satisfaction with the Housing Executive was extremely strong (Table 5), even stronger than the equivalent relationships for repairs and for value for money. This suggests that consultation and information play a significant role in tenants' overall impressions of the Executive.

Table 5: Correlations between tenants' satisfaction with participation, consultation and information, and their overall satisfaction with the Housing Executive (Spearman's rho)

Satisfaction with:	2011	2012	2013	2014
(a) Participation	0.108	0.109	n/a	n/a
(b) Consultation	0.500	0.525	0.516	0.523
(c) Information	0.550	0.574	0.578	0.172

To summarise the evidence in this section, we can state with confidence that Housing Executive tenants who are satisfied with the ways they are engaged are also more likely to be satisfied with other aspects of the service such as repairs, and indeed the overall service provided by their landlord. The qualitative evidence from our focus groups suggests that heavily-engaged residents certainly believe that some service improvements have been driven by their participation and that this has been supported by the Housing Executive's decision to commit resources to strong and effective engagement.



REDUCING COSTS

Reducing Costs: Interview and Focus Group Feedback

A further important area where the business benefits of community engagement could be identified is the provision of value for money savings; a particularly important aspect given the emphasis on resource efficiencies within housing services both in Northern Ireland and throughout the UK. Residents were keen to emphasise that there were clear savings gained from their involvement. For example in **suggesting service improvements**, in **identifying potential problems** and in **offering suggestions for improvement**: ‘I think they’re getting more than value for money. I think the tips for staff that we came up with...were invaluable’ (Disability Forum). In similar terms, residents distinguished between the input they could offer, based on their knowledge, skills and experience within local areas and the service that could be offered by other agencies: ‘as regards value for money, we’re better value than a group of consultants, and we’re a bit more accountable than consultants as well’ (resident).

‘I think they’re getting more than value for money. I think the tips for staff that we came up with...were invaluable’

(Member of the Disability Forum)

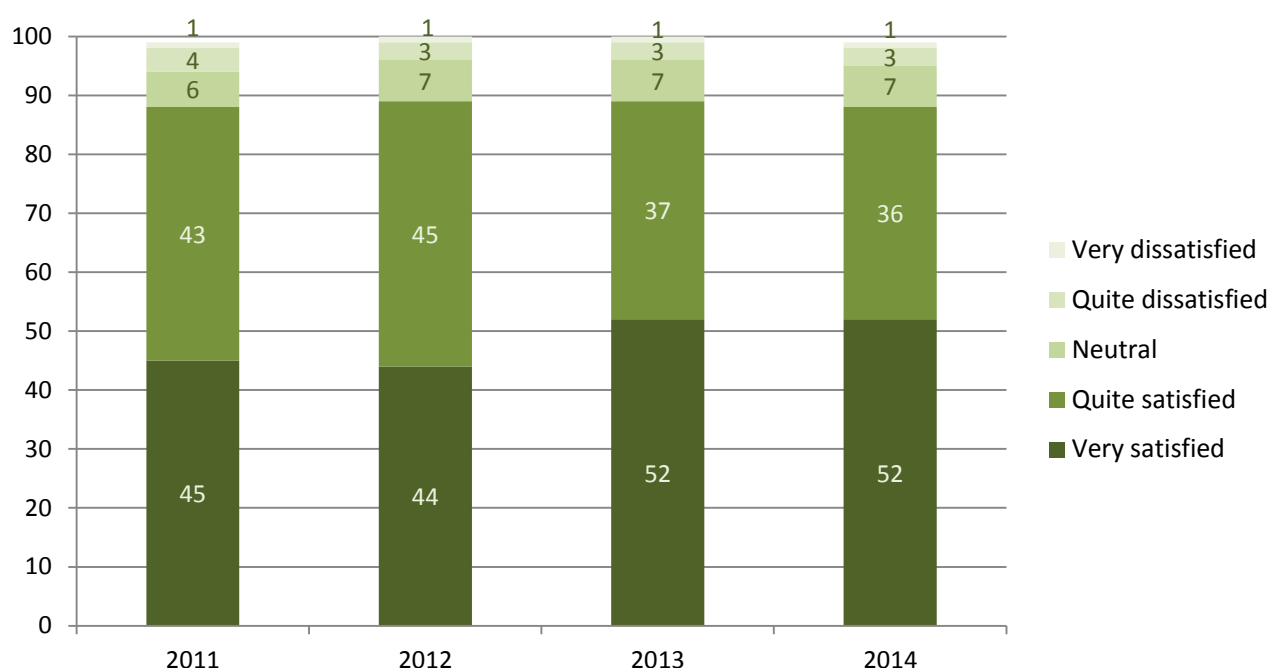
Respondents spoke of an ‘instinctive feeling’ that community involvement could lead to value for money savings. Initiatives mentioned by Central Housing Forum members included developing consultation standards, drafting strategies to tackle anti-social behaviour and introducing community safety initiatives. Although difficult to quantify in financial terms, these initiatives were thought by respondents to have a strong tangible impact.

As an example of cost savings, one area manager outlined how the scrutiny panel had suggested that residents should be asked before the start of their tenancy what internal improvements they intended to make (rather than simply carrying out a set of standard improvements, which residents would subsequently change). It was estimated that this had led to significant reductions in the maintenance budget and was described as ‘bringing the customer to the centre of things and doing things they really want us to do rather than second guess what you *think* they want’ (Interview).

Reducing Costs: CTOS Analysis

The Continuous Tenant Omnibus Survey asks respondents how satisfied they are that their rent offers value for money. Around 90% of tenants report they are satisfied each year, which is an extremely high level of satisfaction for such a key indicator. Even more striking has been the significant growth in the percentage of respondents saying they are “very satisfied” with the overall value for money of the Housing Executive’s services, up from 45% in 2011 to 52% in 2014. During the same period the proportion of dissatisfied tenants dropped by a fifth, from 5.5% in 2011 to just 4.4% in 2015 (Figure 9 overleaf).

Figure 9: Satisfaction with value for money for rent (%), CTOS: 2011-2014 (n=3,400 annually)



Again, there were high extremely levels of correlation between tenants' satisfaction with the Executive's consultation and information (but not participation) and their satisfaction with overall value for money (Table 6). However, the unexpected falling off in the strength of relationship for information in 2014 should be noted.

Table 6: Correlations between tenants' satisfaction with participation, consultation and information, and their satisfaction that rent provides value for money (Spearman's rho)

Satisfaction with:	2011	2012	2013	2014
(a) Participation	0.039	0.069	n/a	n/a
(b) Consultation	0.313	0.338	0.310	0.354
(c) Information	0.351	0.395	0.390	0.113

It is worth noting that the increase in satisfaction with repairs and other services has been accompanied by a highly cost-effective approach to housing services. For example, the average responsive repairs only cost the Housing Executive £63.51 in 2013/14, compared with a median cost of £121.91 and an upper quartile of £101.97 among landlords with more than 20,000 homes (Housing Executive 2014b p.3).



DEVELOPING COMMUNITIES

Developing Communities: Interview and focus group feedback

The benefits of community engagement were not limited to narrow organisational matters. A central objective of the Housing Executive is to develop community cohesion and an effective community engagement process, which enables residents to feel involved in decisions, can facilitate this and at the same time provide benefits to individuals and for wider community relations. From an individual perspective, residents outlined that they had benefited in a number of ways. To give one example, the establishment of a community conference (involving over 300 people) was mentioned by a number of respondents as offering wide opportunities for engagement – ‘I love being involved in it’ was one of the comments. As this resident explained:

Last year I had the great privilege of going out and interviewing a lot of the groups for the Housing Executive. It’s just lovely that, you know, the community leaders are allowed to be involved that heavily in a big massive event that actually, you know, shows good practice throughout the province, actually shows major partnership working between the Housing Executive and the Community Groups (resident).

Such events were therefore seen as an important opportunity to bring people together and to provide an effective dialogue between different groups and with professional participants. Representatives who served on the Central Housing Forum also spoke of how rewarding their involvement had been, helping them develop confidence and skills in negotiating with professional agencies. As one Housing Community Network member stated, ‘when I first came in I hardly wouldn’t have spoke. But I’m now ordering youse all about’. These benefits for residents were described as ‘imparting knowledge and getting an opportunity to bring it home and share it with other people, because I like helping other people’ (Disability Forum member).

The Housing Executive has a role not only in developing and sustaining social housing, but also in seeking to build community cohesion within a contested society. The political geography in which housing is provided by the Housing Executive was described by one stakeholder as ‘unique within the United Kingdom and I think with that kind of role that people talk about in terms of community cohesion, safety; those aspects about contested societies – is pretty unique here’. (Interview)

Residents gained individual benefits from their participation, but they also emphasised that engaging in dialogue and discussion had helped to improve community relations and reduce tensions between different communities. A number of examples were offered to emphasise the way in which discussions about common problems had helped to slowly change entrenched views. In many respects this can be seen as one of the core benefits of community engagement, which is particularly evident within a Northern Ireland context, given the legacy of conflict in some areas. As an example, as a representative of DSD (now DfC) stated: ‘One of the most important things...was the NIHE working on demolishing one of the peace walls. We have some 80 and they can only come down with community involvement’ (Interview). Another respondent reinforced this point in the following terms:

there's just times when there are specific community tensions, so the benefit of working with the local community is that we would be able to, I suppose, reduce costs and minimise any of those tensions....there's still a wee bit of scepticism, so there's a lot of work... they had a Planning for Real day and we have now got the community to buy into doing some environmental enhancements, taking *part* of the wall down and opening up pedestrian gates and access, that at some stage in the future, as part of the normalisation programme, they could be opened on a more permanent basis. (Area Manager).



Interface normalisation: A peace wall is removed and replaced with more open landscaping

Community engagement provided specific benefits in some areas, but respondents suggested that meeting different groups proved highly beneficial. To give an example, one area manager commented:

recently, we did a bus trip... some of the people on that bus hadn't been on either side of the community in over 30 years. It's absolutely amazing...we didn't think it would have had such an impact....there was an appreciation of just the issues that are being dealt with on both sides of the community....I think we've broken down a lot of these barriers between both communities. But there's still a long way to go. If we crack that we've probably cracked the Northern Ireland problem. (Area Manager)

What these examples demonstrated was that effective engagement could begin to **build trust** between different groups. From the perspective of Housing Executive staff this role in developing relationships was crucial in producing safer and more secure neighbourhoods. Thus 'we've built up a lot of trust with the communities, we've worked very hard at being out there, being visible, organising meetings with them - so much so that people are willing to go into each other's communities' (Area Manager). This was seen as highly significant in developing relationships between community groups and effective engagement was thought to be one of the best ways of ensuring that communities can communicate on an equal basis:

There are areas of common interest and they see that and recognise it, you know with the issues that you have when you need schemes and haven't had improvements - particularly there when we weren't doing any improvement work for about a year, eighteen months there, and both communities were affected by that and how they saw the benefits of lobbying together on that (Area Manager).

Moreover, community engagement could improve relationships between residents and Housing Executive staff. In the words of one resident 'when you talk to the staff...they also seemed to be *learning* from the engagement, and it seemed to be going right down and helping people' (Disability Forum). This comment was developed as follows: 'They sort of listen to us now, whereas before they would have presented us with *fait accompli* and then it was all – they couldn't see, because they weren't living, you know, the way we were, *in the communities*' (Disability Forum). These benefits were therefore seen as mutually reinforcing. For example 'it's important from the other side, from the staffing point of view, when the staff become more community engaged, it's better job enrichment and you can develop staff (Interview, Area Manager).

An important aspect of the work undertaken by the Housing Executive is the extent to which the organisation sees its role as being wider than simply providing housing. As one respondent commented 'they make it in their interest to build communities around the housing stock they own and look at the social fabric of housing' (Interview).

Building relationships:

*Housing Executive Board
members and staff meet
local community
representatives in Scrabo,
Newtownards*



Developing Communities: CTOS/HouseMark Analysis

One of our most striking statistical findings was the very high satisfaction of Housing Executive residents with their neighbourhood as a place to live. This is widely seen as an important indicator of a landlord's performance, but it takes on a particular salience in areas where local communities have felt beleaguered or neglected. Here the overall trend has been for the proportion of the Housing Executive's tenants who are "quite satisfied" to decrease, but with an increase in the proportion of "very satisfied" tenants over the same period, and a noticeable fall in the proportion of tenants who were dissatisfied (Figure 10). In this area the Housing Executive strongly out-performs its comparator landlords in Great Britain (Figure 11).²

² The Housing Executive also scores highly on other indicators of neighbourhood cohesion; for example, it scored 36 new anti-social behaviour cases per thousand properties in 2013-14, compared with a median of 62 per thousand among large landlords (NIHE 2014b, p4)

Figure 10: Satisfaction with the neighbourhood as a place to live, CTOS: 2011-2014 (n=3,400 annually)

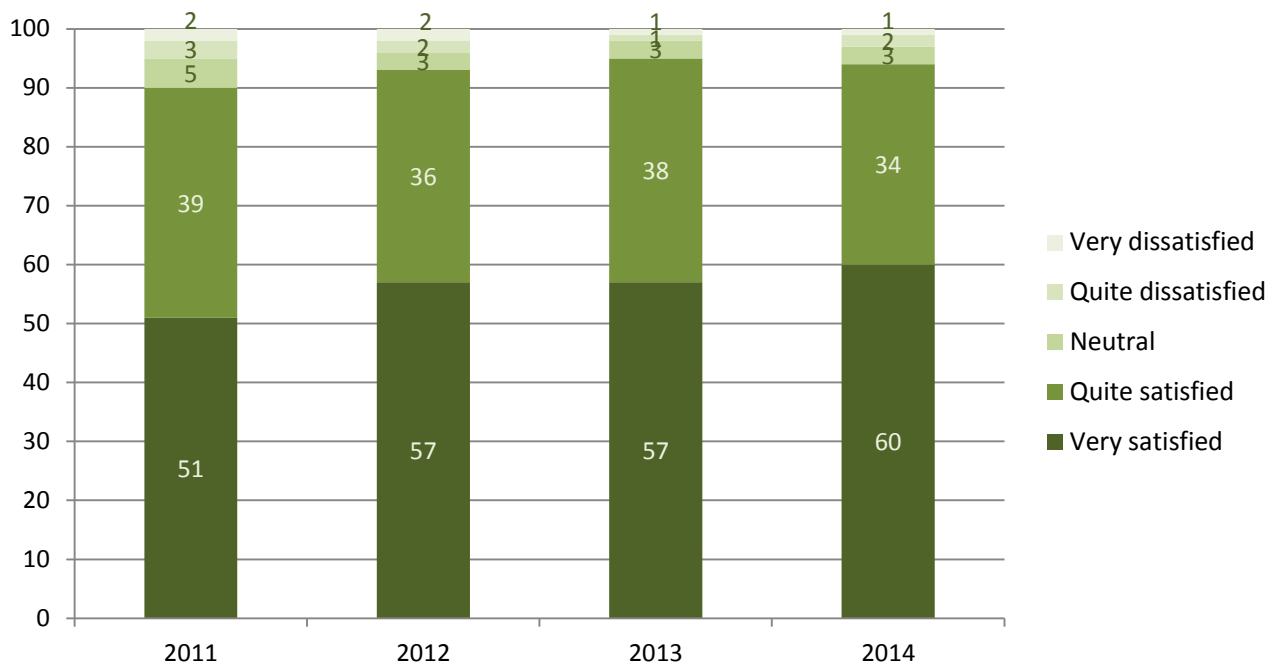
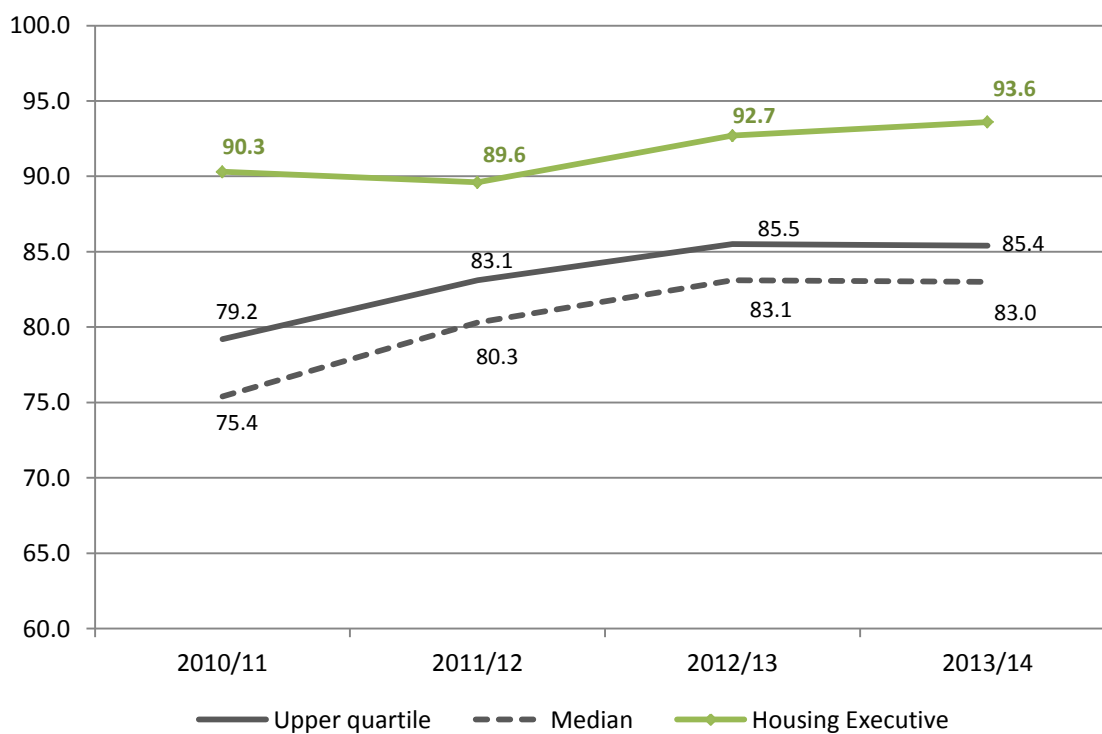


Figure 11: Resident satisfaction with neighbourhood for large landlords (%) (HouseMark, 2010/11-2013/14)



Although the relationships between residents' satisfaction with consultation and information and their satisfaction with the neighbourhood (Table 7) are not quite as strong as the correlations for some other aspects of the service (after all, the Housing Executive does not have as much control over this aspect of residents' experiences), they were still statistically significant and we can state with confidence that tenants who were satisfied with their landlord's consultation were also more likely to be satisfied with their neighbourhood as a place to live. Our conclusion is that good consultation and engagement by the Housing Executive does appear to be linked with local communities' satisfaction with their own neighbourhood as a good place to live.

Table 7: Correlations between tenants' satisfaction with participation, consultation and information, and their satisfaction with the neighbourhood (Spearman's rho)

Satisfaction with:	2011	2012	2013	2014
(a) Participation	0.035	0.033	n/a	n/a
(b) Consultation	0.292	0.269	0.240	0.233
(c) Information	0.287	0.291	0.272	0.050

The benefits of community engagement can be seen as mutually reinforcing. In this regard community engagement could enable better relationships between landlord and residents and help to improve decision-making. For example:

I think we benefitted the Housing Executive immensely, because it meant that the staff that we worked with who got to that level, whenever there was any change of staff or retirement or movement, those members of staff that came on board had to come up to the same level and work with us as well [as previous staff] so I think we benefitted the Housing Executive as much as we benefitted ourselves (Resident).

Overall, the community engagement work undertaken by the Housing Executive highlighted a number of important benefits and residents strongly supported the idea that such work should continue. At the same time there was considerable concern about developments in the future and what role the Housing Executive would play in developing these initiatives. In the words of one resident:

As much as I feel that the Housing Executive are a leading force really, in their tenant participation (because I think they do a brilliant job), I'm really worried that the next stage of the social housing reform, that the housing associations will not take on the same role. (Resident)

Such concerns heightened the extent to which the improvements represented by resident involvement were incremental and contingent on circumstances, as well as being volatile in situations where considerable tensions may remain. As one respondent described efforts to encourage cross-community interaction through the HCN, 'we're only in an arranged marriage – we're not quite there yet'.

CONCLUSIONS

This report confirms the findings of previous research, that community engagement by social landlords has a number of key business benefits, namely:

- **identifying need;**
- **improving services;**
- **reducing costs; and**
- **developing communities.**

Whilst the context for community engagement in Northern Ireland may differ from other parts of the UK, the overall outcomes are broadly similar.

Given the community tensions, the legacy of conflict and the severe pressure on resources, it is a credit to the staff and residents of the Northern Ireland Housing Executive that the commitment and energy devoted to community engagement is reflected in a high level of satisfaction with both involvement and service provision.

Community engagement initially helped in identifying needs and the Housing Executive's consultation and engagement is very highly rated by its tenants, whose satisfaction with the Executive's consultation places the organisation in the upper quartile of large landlords. Annual surveys show steady increases in resident satisfaction with consultation and our focus groups with engaged tenants clearly demonstrated the value they place on both general consultation and also specialist forums addressing issues around disability and the needs of rural communities.

The evidence presented in this study indicates how community engagement work has helped Housing Executive staff develop a rich understanding of local community needs.

We found strong evidence that community engagement had helped to improve service provision, with extremely high correlations between residents' satisfaction with consultation and engagement and their satisfaction with other housing services such as repairs. While correlations statistics on their own cannot prove the extent to which consultation is driving increased satisfaction with services, our focus groups and interviews demonstrated residents' strong belief that their involvement had resulted in service improvements in significant areas of work.

Combining the quantitative and qualitative data, we are confident that community engagement activities have helped the Housing Executive to improve its housing services to its tenants and to out-perform most of its peers in the UK.

Comparing its benchmarking data with large social landlords in Great Britain, the Housing Executive performs well not only on resident satisfaction but also on key value for money financial indicators such as the cost of responsive repairs. In addition, one of the most striking findings was the sharp increase in the proportion of tenants who are very satisfied with the value for money of services in recent years. This reinforces earlier research with another large landlord, where we also found improved resident consultation driving a virtuous cycle of increased satisfaction with services and better use of scarce resources.

Our overall impression is that the Housing Executive is developing a genuine culture of engagement and consultation that can continue to drive further improvements in the coming years.

The extremely high levels of Housing Executive residents' satisfaction with their local neighbourhood as a place to live, which far out-strips those of its comparator landlords, are especially impressive (and start from a strong baseline of performance). In addition, the percentage of residents saying they are very satisfied with their neighbourhood has increased markedly in recent years and suggests that resident engagement has played a role in developing cohesive communities.

While we recognise the wide range of services and agencies that can affect satisfaction with the local neighbourhood, our view following analysis of qualitative and quantitative data is that community engagement activity has played an important role in developing communities.

Looking to the future

Our findings show that the Housing Executive has an effective overall culture of participation which contributes to high levels of resident satisfaction with services. The business benefits of participation can be evidenced through increased resident satisfaction, improvements in service delivery and better linkages between communities (both in urban and rural locations). Our respondents highlighted the importance of continuing investment in community involvement and the need to ensure that the existing structures for participation should not be dismantled in case performance falls off as a result. Recommendations for the future include:

BUILDING ON SUCCESS: TAKING COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT FORWARD



Developing the user Forums

The Rural Forum is well established and provides an effective counter to any perception that services are mainly tailored to residents in the Belfast area. The Disability Forum provides an effective voice to groups who may otherwise feel marginalised. The Youth Forum is at an embryonic stage and should be given resources to develop its promising work further.



Providing an increased focus on the opportunities to mix with others of different community backgrounds

One of the most striking features of our research was the expertise in inter-community working developed by the Housing Executive and the value this has for residents.



Effective training in community involvement

This is to ensure that staff – particularly new Patch Managers and customer-facing staff – remain committed to resident participation and have a good awareness of the associated benefits.

One of the key messages of this report is that any attempt to reduce resources devoted to community involvement would be likely to result in serious consequences, for service delivery, for performance standards and for wider community relationships. It is important that the work devoted to community involvement should be seen in conjunction with wider policies to reduce segregation and build community cohesion (for example the Department for Communities Tenant Participation Strategy) within and between neighbourhoods in Northern Ireland. The short-term investment in this work is therefore likely to have more significant long-term implications.

We would add one word of caution. In our view it is important to maintain a strong commitment to consultation as a permanent feature of the tenant offer, as our research suggests it is a key driver in the continuous improvement of other services. In addition, tenants who have come to value strong engagement are often particularly sensitive to any attempts to roll back commitments in this area. This can be a challenge

when budgets are tight, but we believe the Housing Executive's experience, like those of other landlords that we have examined, provides a cost-effective way to use customers' experiences and insights to drive improvements in service delivery.

There is a strong *business* as well as *social* case for community engagement and the Housing Executive should be supported in developing this very important area of work.

Acknowledgements

The research team would like to thank all those involved in the study. Particular thanks to: Heather Porter (Housing Executive Research Unit) for her hard work in coordinating and working with resident groups; Paddy Gray (Ulster University) for conducting interviews and focus groups; staff working within the Housing Executive, Disability Action, the Rural Community Network and Northern Ireland Youth Forum; and – most importantly – to those who attended and agreed to be interviewed.

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