

Housing

Summary



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Improving services through resident involvement

The Audit Commission is an independent body responsible for ensuring that public money is spent economically, efficiently and effectively, to achieve high-quality local and national services for the public. Our work covers local government, housing, health, criminal justice and fire and rescue services.

As an independent watchdog, we provide important information on the quality of public services. As a driving force for improvement in those services, we provide practical recommendations and spread best practice. As an independent auditor, we monitor spending to ensure public services are good value for money.

The Housing Corporation is responsible for investing public money in housing associations and for protecting that investment and ensuring it provides decent homes and services for residents. We invest in housing associations to provide homes that meet local needs. Through regulation we seek to ensure that people will want, and be able, to live in these homes, now and in the future.

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For further information on the work of the Commission please contact:

Steve Bundred, Audit Commission,
1st Floor, Millbank Tower, Millbank,
London SW1P 4HQ

Tel: 020 7828 1212

Textphone (minicom): 020 7630 0421

Resident involvement is now central to government and local organisations' approach to the delivery of housing services. However, an untouchable quality has developed around the issue, which means that few people are prepared to question its costs and benefits, or whether it is a worthwhile process. This has led to considerable confusion about why social landlords involve residents, and what the most effective approaches are.

This report argues that residents and landlords should adopt a more questioning and open approach. There needs to be greater honesty about the achievements that activities are designed to accomplish. Housing organisations should be clear about whether they are involving residents to:

- improve services or housing stock;
- enhance accountability to users; and/or
- build social capital and community capacity.

The benefits of resident involvement can be considerable. Our research established clear evidence of benefits, to the 'business', to residents and to the wider community. Specific gains for housing organisations include an impact on performance, better services and enhanced accountability. For example, housing associations found that involving residents in refurbishing an estate helped to reduce void levels and tenancy turnover. These improvements are important to residents too, but involvement can benefit residents in additional ways: such as individual capacity building and improved local community involvement. The latter can have a wider reaching impact in terms of stabilising communities and helping to ensure their sustainability.

Resident involvement should be integral to the overall work of housing organisations. Many will therefore find the costs difficult to identify. Nevertheless, we found that those housing associations that carried out some tracking of expenditure on resident involvement found themselves in a position to make more informed strategic decisions about their approach to involvement. The costs to residents should also be recognised. If these are not properly understood and residents' contributions are taken for granted, their commitment to the involvement process may dwindle.

The study considered the evidence relating to the costs and benefits of resident involvement and concludes that:

- involving residents to improve services does work and it can provide value for money;
- there are many good examples of housing associations positively affecting community capacity, but these gains are less obvious, tend to be over the longer term and usually involve a range of partner agencies; and
- involving residents in governance is often more challenging, especially if the organisation is not prepared for their involvement. In those circumstances the benefits might not easily translate into good value for money.

However, proper accountability is important. If the inclusion of residents in governance structures works well, it can significantly enhance the accountability of housing organisations. If housing associations believe in including resident on boards, then they must invest in and support the process.