Housing through Social Enterprise

Recommendations

About the research

The Housing through Social Enterprise research project examined the impacts of different approaches to housing provision on tenants' health and wellbeing. The project included tenants from social housing and private rented sector (PRS) providers in a three-year, longitudinal, mixed methods study. This document details the recommendations from the research, which will be relevant for: policy-makers in housing and public health; housing associations and practitioners in social housing; and landlords and letting agents in the PRS.

The research showed that tenants' health and wellbeing is shaped by whether they are able to feel at home in their tenancy, and that this is underpinned by four key foundations:

- **Relationships.** Tenants do better when they have a named member of staff, who respects and understands their individual needs, history and situation.
- **Property quality.** Beyond the basics of a defect-free, efficient property, tenants need to be able to make their property feel like home. For some the ideal is an empty, blank canvas that they can customise. For others, it is much harder to make a home if the property is unfurnished and undecorated.
- **Affordability.** Reasonable rent levels are important, but there are other financial factors at the start of a tenancy which can have a substantial effect on tenants' wellbeing. Help to deal with benefits, utility costs, refurbishment expenses and arrears is key.
- **Neighbourhood.** Tenants settle more easily into their property if they have as much choice as possible about where they live and are supported to find the right property in the right place where they feel safe and a sense of belonging.

More details about the research and the findings report are available at www.gcph.co.uk – search for 'Housing through Social Enterprise'. The project was part of the Commonhealth research programme, which explored health impacts of social enterprise in a range of fields (see www.commonhealth.uk). While the report does not focus on the differential impacts of social enterprise per se, it was notable that a social mission was important for all three organisations in delivering positive housing experiences for their tenants.

In order to develop recommendations that would be realistic and practical, the project concluded with an event in February 2019 which brought together housing practitioners, tenants, policy-makers and public health professionals. Participants discussed the implications of the research findings in the contexts of their own experiences and expertise. The recommendations that follow are based on these discussions and fall into six categories: health and wellbeing of tenants; relationships and communication; property quality; finance and affordability; tenant participation and empowerment; and organisational standards and regulation. Each section indicates the research findings that participants highlighted as being important, before providing a set of recommendations.

Glasgow Centre for Population Health

UNIVERSITY OF STIRLING

GCU Glasgow Caledonian University

commonhealth

University for the Common Good

There was a considerable degree of overlap between those recommendations for the social and private rented sectors and, as such, we have not divided these recommendations by sector. However, we have highlighted the recommendations that are practice-focused (in blue) and those that are policy-focused (in green) for ease of reading.

Health and wellbeing of tenants

The research highlights the centrality of housing as a social determinant of health and the crucial role of housing providers in shaping the impacts on health and wellbeing. All of the recommendations in this paper relate to this core finding, but there are also some general proposals that build on this understanding:

Awareness. Greater awareness needs to be raised, especially across the PRS, about the impacts that housing can have on tenants' health and wellbeing. Organisations representing landlords and letting agents should communicate with members about the public health implications of their decision-making and practices. Local authorities should raise awareness with individual landlords at the point of registration and provide information on resources that could be used to support tenants.

Prioritise tenants' needs. Housing organisations should ensure that their strategic approach is centred on tenants' stability and security in their home, to ensure successful, sustainable tenancies. Housing providers should ensure that tenants, not properties, are their first priority, and work with tenants to empower them individually and collectively.

Public health. The role of housing as a social determinant of health, including in the context of climate change, should be embedded in public health policy and practice, and be placed high on the agenda of the new Public Health Scotland organisation. Housing is central to a Whole Systems Approach to tackling poverty and inequality.

Relationships and communication

The research demonstrates the importance of strong relationships between tenants and housing providers and clear communication between them. Where relationships and communication are good, tenants tend to settle in more easily and are more likely to sustain their tenancy. To help housing organisations and staff to meet the needs of a diverse range of tenants:

Person-centred service. Housing organisations need to support their staff to provide a person-centred service. This requires training and support at an organisational level. The work being done in homelessness services around 'Psychologically-Informed Environments' may be helpful here.

Start early. Housing staff should be supported to start building relationships with tenants early, ideally before the start of a tenancy.

Named contact. Tenants benefit from having a named main contact and being able to communicate with them directly. This is particularly important for vulnerable tenants. This does not mean that one person is solely responsible for the tenant, their tenancy and their property or that this person cannot change. It means that tenants should know who their main contact is and receive a direct communication when this changes.

Meeting diverse needs. Different tenants have different needs. Housing organisations need to have a robust system for assessing the needs of new tenants and employ a flexible approach to contact, based on these assessed needs. This will result in a more proactive approach for some tenants and a more ad hoc, light-touch approach for others. For potentially vulnerable tenants, regular contact and relationship-building should continue even when the tenant is managing well in their tenancy.

Managing diverse expectations. Different tenants have different expectations from their housing and housing provider. Staff need to manage tenants' expectations and focus on building their confidence and capacity. This can mean challenging tenants whose expectations are unrealistic, or who do not engage with support when their tenancy is at risk. This relies on having a good relationship with the tenant.

Information. New tenants have to deal with a lot of information at the very start of their tenancy and often cannot take it all in. Repeating information during follow-up contact can help ensure that tenants are informed, settled and happy.

Funding. High quality tenancy support services require funding, particularly for vulnerable households in the PRS. The Scottish Government should review the provision of tenancy support services and explore funding options with local authorities and housing providers across the social and private rented sectors.

Property quality

The research shows that housing quality is extremely important to tenants, although each tenant has different expectations and aspirations. The condition of a property on move-in day can provide or undermine the foundation of a sustainable tenancy, with impacts on health and wellbeing. Recognising the need to manage costs, these recommendations aim to improve property quality:

Broader basic standards. The aspects of housing quality that are important for tenants include the standard of décor, any furnishings and the cleanliness of a property. Housing providers should aim to keep these standards as high as possible.

Customisation. Some tenants are happy to internally refurbish properties and have the capacity and resources to do so, while others struggle with a 'blank canvas'. Housing organisations need to understand tenants' expectations, capacities and resources from the outset and use this understanding to match tenants to available properties, providing additional support for refurbishment where needed.

Raise minimum standards. The Scottish Housing Quality Standards (SHQS) should be expanded to include basic standards of décor and more detailed checks for defects. The SHQS, the Repairing Standard and the enforcement of these standards should be harmonised across sectors, levelling up to the higher standard in each aspect.

Funding. A large number of properties in the PRS suffer from poor quality, a significant proportion of which are related to issues with common parts. These issues particularly affect tenemental stock and are often outwith the control of tenants and landlords. The Scottish Parliamentary Working Group on Tenement Maintenance should consider options for financial support where necessary to bring all properties up to the required standard, including addressing common parts.

Finance and affordability

This research did not find significant problems with rent affordability, but it did highlight a range of other housing-related costs that cause substantial problems for tenants. Many of these are unexpected and occur at the outset of the tenancy or soon after. These financial issues can seriously impair tenants' ability to settle in and, in turn, their health and wellbeing. The following recommendations aim to reduce the financial strain placed on tenants:

Arrears management. Rent arrears are of central concern to housing organisations and lead to a range of interventions. However, intervening when a tenant is already in arrears or having other problems may be too late to restore stability to their tenancy and staff should identify triggers for additional or early intervention as part of their relationship-building with the tenant. Working with third sector partners may help here, as tenants may be more open with organisations who are not their landlord.

Funding the basics. The processes and conditions for the Scottish Welfare Fund need to be reviewed. While the Fund is invaluable for tenants moving into a new property, particularly if it is unfurnished, there are issues. Tenants cannot make a claim until their tenancy has begun, the process is often very slow and the level of grant is insufficient to meet some tenants' needs. 'Starter packs' provided through housing organisations may be an effective, alternative option.

Tenancy and benefits transitions. Establishing new or amended claims for either Housing Benefit or Universal Credit are problematic for both tenants and housing providers. Landlords struggle with the fact that rent is charged in advance but benefits are paid in arrears. Tenants struggle when their new property is not in move-in condition and they need to retain a previous tenancy for a short period to undertake basic refurbishment before moving. The Scottish Government should develop proposals for improved systems that support both landlords and tenants in tenancy transitions.

Housing supply. The supply of affordable housing is crucial in meeting the housing needs of low-income households and the Affordable Housing Supply Programme is making a substantial contribution to this. However, there is a need to continue this investment beyond the initial five years.

Tenant participation and empowerment

The research highlighted the importance of housing organisations meetings tenants' needs and empowering them to manage their tenancies effectively. Tenant involvement in housing service and provision is an important mechanism to ensure that organisations respond effectively to the diversity of tenants' needs. As well as responding to individuals, housing organisations need mechanisms to listen to tenants collectively:

Broader perspectives. Housing Associations should aim to support and involve independent tenants' organisations in shaping their service, separate from their Board, to gather as wide a range of perspectives as possible.

Regulatory requirements. Tenant participation has been an important element in improving accountability and standards in social housing, but the requirements need to be fit for the 21st century. The Scottish Government should review these requirements to ensure that they respond to the increased diversity of tenants and the changing nature of social housing providers. PRS tenants should also have rights to participate or be consulted about their housing, including the way it is managed by letting agents.

Organisational standards and regulation

The research highlighted some examples of excellent practice in working with and supporting tenants but also demonstrated the need to ensure that regulation works effectively to raise standards of practice across the social and private rented sectors. These final recommendations will help to deliver all of the other recommendations in this paper:

Collaboration. There are many examples of excellent practice in working with and supporting tenants. Housing providers and representative bodies for the housing sector should work together to share examples of good practice through inter-organisational and cross-sectoral collaboration.

Training for letting agents. The Letting Agent Code of Practice is a significant step in regulating the PRS, so its impact should be carefully reviewed. Such a review should focus on the experience of tenants and consider the training that would be required for letting agents to deliver a person-centred service as described above.

Training for landlords. Landlords are not currently required to sign up to a code of practice and the 'fit and proper person' test for landlord registration is limited. A code of practice for landlords should be introduced, mirroring that for letting agents. This should include training requirements, particularly for larger landlords with multiple properties, including local arrangements for referring tenants for support with a variety of agencies.

Glasgow Centre for Population Health

UNIVERSITY OF STIRLING

GCU Glasgow Caledonian University

commonhealth

University for the Common Good