

# Housing Practice

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## Tenant scrutiny

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# Tenant scrutiny

Social landlords have been involving and consulting with their tenants for many years. However, increasingly many are now going further and giving tenants the power to challenge them on their performance and to drive improvements. This is often referred to as **'tenant scrutiny'**.

Establishing a **'scrutiny panel'** is often a key mechanism to achieve this. A scrutiny panel (which may be referred to locally by a variety of names, such as a tenant panel, forum or senate) is a group of tenants with the power to review information about their landlord's performance and make recommendations for improvement. In this way they are very different from a traditional 'tenants or residents association'.

## Tenant scrutiny and co-regulation

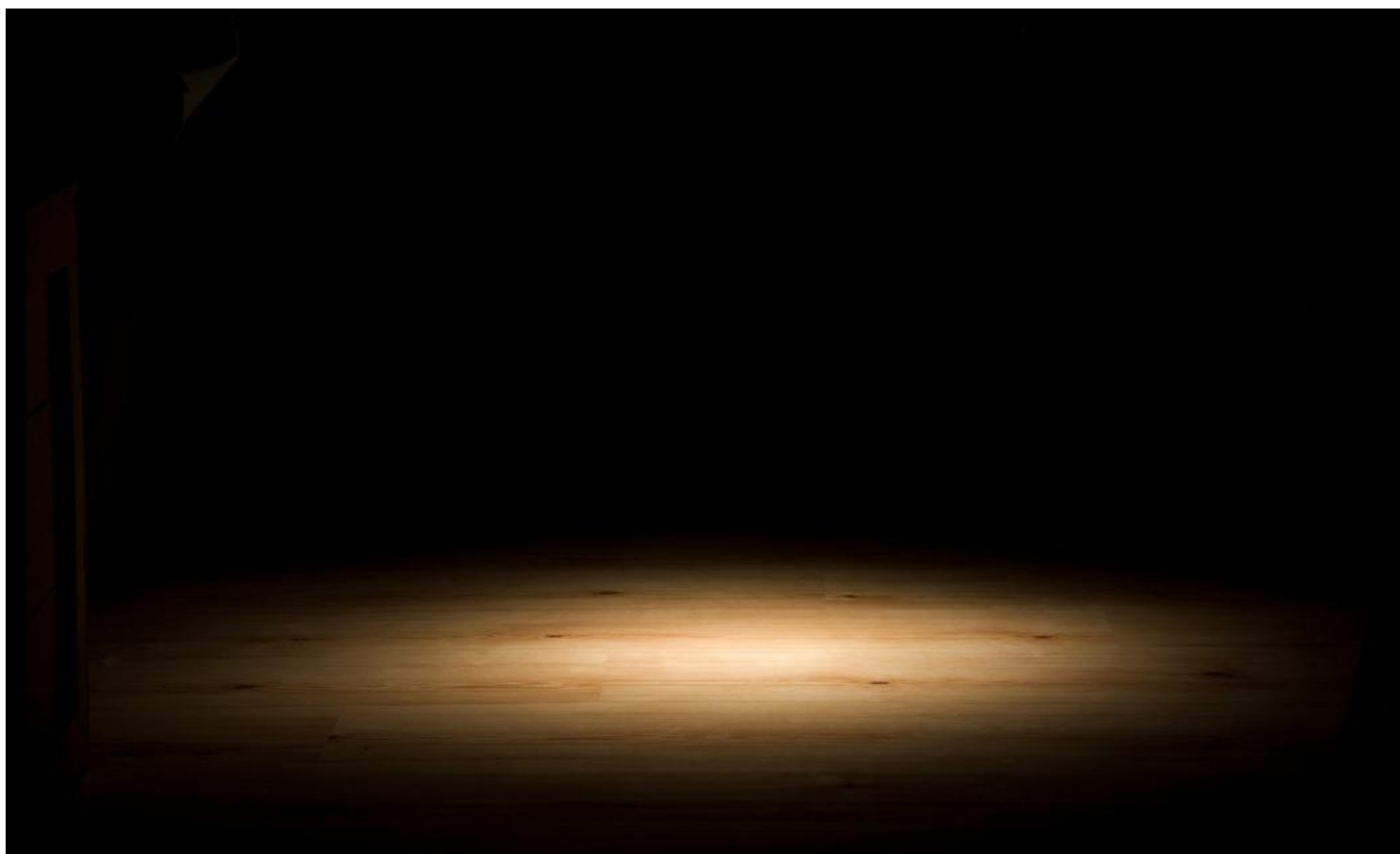
In England, tenant scrutiny is an integral part of **'co-regulation'**. The principle of co-regulation is that responsibility for monitoring and challenging housing providers' performance sits primarily with their governing bodies and with tenants themselves, rather than with a regulator.

In 2010 the current regulator in England, the Tenant Services Authority (TSA), identified 10 housing providers as **'co-regulatory champions'** to pioneer this approach. The Centre for Public Scrutiny (CfPS), working with Scrutiny Empowerment Partners, has produced a detailed compendium of practice based on their experiences of developing mechanisms for tenant scrutiny. This edition of housing practice is based on the lessons set out in that report.

The 10 co-regulatory champions established by the TSA are:

- AmicusHorizon
- Community Gateway Association
- Family Housing Association
- Helena Partnerships
- New Charter Housing Trust
- Riverside
- Salix Homes
- Soha Housing
- Wirral Partnership Homes
- Wherry Housing Association

The CfPS Compendium of Practice is available online at: [www.cfps.org.uk](http://www.cfps.org.uk).





## Why embrace tenant scrutiny?

In England, the Homes and Communities Agency (HCA) will take over the regulation of social housing from April 2012.

Its approach will be based strongly on the principle of co-regulation:

- it will have a statutory duty to minimise interference
- it will focus on '**economic regulation**' (regulation to ensure that social landlords are well run, financially viable and that value for money is achieved from public funds) and will have a much reduced role in '**consumer regulation**' (regulation to ensure that services provided to tenants meet required standards)
- there will be a clear expectation that landlords should be accountable to tenants for the quality of their services.

There will also be a revised tenant involvement and empowerment standard, which all landlords will be expected to meet. A consultation on the proposed new standard has recently closed, however if implemented in the form set out in the consultation, it will require landlords to:

- provide opportunities for tenants to be involved in the scrutiny of their performance and the making of recommendations about how performance might be improved
- support the formation and activities of tenant panels, or equivalent groups, and respond in a constructive and timely manner to them

- provide timely and relevant performance information to support effective scrutiny by tenants.

Ultimately, the purpose of establishing tenant scrutiny is to improve organisational performance and the standard of services.

The co-regulatory champions' experiences clearly show that it can be effective in doing this because:

- it provides a valuable reality check about the quality of services
- it ensures tenants' experiences are routinely considered alongside other forms of performance data
- it provides a mechanism to ensure that landlords are delivering the services tenants want, which means they can tailor their services to reflect local needs and priorities
- tenants can be powerful advocates for value for money.

**"Landlords should embrace co-regulation as a real opportunity to understand how customers experience services and actually start to deliver services how their customers want to receive them."**

*Margaret Connor,  
Senior Customer Governance Officer,  
Salix Homes*

### Practice example

## Wirral Partnership Homes

Scrutiny work at Wirral Partnership Homes (WPH) is carried out by an Advisory and Scrutiny Panel (ASP), which recently reviewed their arrangements for tackling anti-social behaviour. The review revealed that the service was not as cost-effective as those provided by other landlords and that many WPH tenants were dissatisfied with it.

As a result of ASP's recommendations, the externally provided service contract was terminated and re-provided in-house. This has generated significant savings of £250,000, which have been reinvested in the in-house service and in youth diversionary activities.

ASP are now monitoring outcomes for tenants, such as increased customer satisfaction and reports on outcomes from the diversionary projects.

ASP's review of anti-social behaviour clearly demonstrates the role that tenant scrutiny can play in securing better value for money for both landlords and residents, as well as better outcomes and increased satisfaction.

# What is the relationship between scrutiny and involvement?

Tenant scrutiny can build upon and be supported by other mechanisms for involvement.

Successful landlords should continue to recognise that individual tenants want to be involved in different ways, depending on their areas of interest, the amount of time they are willing and able to commit, their skills and the types of activity they enjoy or are comfortable taking part in. As such, landlords should continue to offer a variety of different ways for tenants to engage with them.

These are likely to range from quick, one-off feedback mechanisms, like surveys and online polls, to activities that require a more significant and lasting time commitment, including sitting on a scrutiny panel.

Any panel charged with scrutinising the organisation's performance will need access to information gathered through various involvement activities, such as surveys, mystery shopping and inspections of services, in order to effectively hold the landlord to account. There should therefore be clear links between scrutiny and other forms of involvement. Tenant scrutiny will be stronger if it can draw on the work and views of other tenant groups.

"It's been really empowering for tenants... as a result we feel we've had a bigger impact."

*Peter McLaughlan,  
Chair of Way Ahead with Wherry,  
Wherry Housing Association*

## Practice example

### New Charter Housing Trust

Co-regulation at New Charter Housing Trust involves a range of opportunities for tenants to contribute.

This includes:

- the scrutiny panel, which is a group of 12 tenants set up in 2009 to scrutinise performance across service areas and to carry out in depth reviews. The panel aim to complete 3 to 4 scrutiny reviews per year and report their findings directly to senior managers and board. The panel carries out its own recruitment process when vacancies arise

- mystery shopping and resident inspection – both of which started in 2008. Both receive regular training and have forward work programmes, including work in support of the scrutiny panel
- service review groups covering repairs and maintenance, relets, revenues and neighbourhoods
- working groups and panels that act as 'task and finish' groups. An example is the 'Xtra Factor Team' which helped in developing local offers and writing the annual report to tenants.



# What are the key features of successful tenant scrutiny?

Tenant scrutiny is an approach rather than a process. As such there are differences between organisations in the way that their individual scrutiny panels are comprised, the specific roles they carry out and their place within the structure of the organisation.

It is important that local conditions are taken into account when establishing tenant scrutiny in an organisation. Landlords should develop structures and processes that work for them and for their tenants, however, there are some common features of successful scrutiny panels, developed by CfPS:

- they act as a 'critical friend'
- they act as a voice for tenants
- they are tenant-led and independent
- they are focused on improving services.

The rest of this edition sets out the practical steps that landlords can take to embed these features in their own scrutiny mechanisms.

## Acting as a critical friend

It is vital that scrutiny is both robust and constructive. It is the role of any scrutiny panel to consider evidence and to use it to challenge areas of poor performance, but also to make constructive suggestions for improvement.

“We act as a critical friend to the Board. Because we are the service users – the residents – that is the best perspective that Soha can have.”

*Nasreen Razaq Al-Hamdani,  
Chair, Tenant Scrutiny Group,  
Soha Housing*

To support this, landlords should:

- **clearly define the role of tenant scrutiny:** Tenant scrutiny should be recognised as part of the way in which the organisation is run. Develop a clear statement of its purpose and protocols that spell out the panel's powers and responsibilities. Set out what information scrutiny panels can expect to be provided with, how they can make recommendations and what action is expected from the organisation in response.
- **invest time in building a collaborative relationship:** Getting the balance right in being a critical friend can be challenging. Staff and tenants need to invest time to establish a positive relationship.

“Engage managers and staff early in the setup of the scrutiny panel and raise awareness. In local authorities, the role of the panel can be seen as a duplication of elected member roles. A clear understanding of the scrutiny group's remit is needed to remove myths and perceived threats to status and to ensure as smooth as possible a passage to achieve real co-regulation.”

*Richard Birchett, Assistant Director, Cheshire West and Chester Council*

## Ensuring scrutiny arrangements are supported and sufficiently resourced

In order to fulfil their role as a critical friend effectively, tenants will need to be supported and will need access to good quality information. To achieve this, landlords should:

- **commit to providing clear and accessible information:** In order to effectively scrutinise performance, tenants will need access to evidence. Remember that tenants are volunteers and that providing too much information runs the risk of swamping them. Panel members need concise, focused and accessible performance information to enable them to ask the right questions of the organisation. Tenants should also be able to influence how and why the organisation collects and analyses particular sets of data.
- **invest in tenants' capacity:** Scrutiny is a very different function to traditional resident involvement activities and requires different knowledge and skills. This may take time and an investment in capacity building to achieve. A tailored package of support may be needed.

## Acting as a voice for tenants

A key benefit of tenant scrutiny is that it makes the organisation directly accountable to its tenants, ensuring that resources can be targeted in the right areas and that services reflect local needs and priorities. For this to be effective a scrutiny panel, likely to be comprised of only a small group of tenants, needs to reflect the views of the wider tenant base.

*“Be proactive in trying to get people involved. Offer a range of opportunities across diverse communities but don’t be discouraged if they don’t want to be involved – they have the right to say no!”*

*Karen Perry,  
Head of Community Empowerment,  
Community Gateway Association*

To support this, landlords should:

- **ensure that information from other forms of involvement is fed in to scrutiny:** There should be a clear relationship between tenant scrutiny and other groups and involvement mechanisms, with any panel considering information from, and possibly commissioning, activities such as surveys, mystery shopping and inspections of services. This relationship ensures that the views of the wider tenant base are fed in to the scrutiny panel’s activities.
- **attract a diverse range of tenants to get involved:** Aim to recruit a diverse range of tenants and ensure that members of scrutiny panels have an understanding of the diversity of the wider body of tenants. Innovative

methods may be needed to involve young people, minority ethnic groups and other under-represented groups in the communities in which you work. Offer a flexible range of opportunities for tenants to get their voices heard.

## Being tenant-led and independent

It is vitally important that scrutiny is tenant-owned and tenant-led, with tenants determining areas of work and driving agendas. This ensures that the organisation is reporting to tenants about the issues that really matter to them.

To support this, landlords should:

- **design structures with tenants from the outset:** If tenants are involved in designing structures and processes right from the start it is more likely to work for them and keep them involved. Whatever structures are put in place, there must be accountability, openness and transparency.
- **get recruitment right:** To find residents who are willing to contribute actively to the scrutiny role it is vital to put effort into getting your recruitment right. Design the right person specification or role profile for the kind of tenant you want to get involved, people who will be ‘independently-minded’ and willing to consider evidence and to tackle issues that may not affect them personally, but impact on a wider group of tenants.
- **ensure tenant scrutiny is independent of your existing governance structure:** It is an important principle of any scrutiny panel that it is independent of the decision-making structures that it is required to hold to account.

## Focusing on improving services

It is vital that scrutiny has a clear purpose and remit to improve services. This will help to keep its work focused and also ensure the panel’s role is recognised and valued throughout the organisation.

To support this, landlords should:

- **have clear processes for the panel to make practical recommendations for improvement:** There should be a clear and accepted way in which the panel make recommendations for improvement, as well as processes for those recommendations to be considered and acted on by the organisation.
- **monitor whether changes are made to services following recommendations for improvement:** To ensure that scrutiny is leading to real change, monitor the outcomes of their recommendations. Were changes made to services as a result and did they lead to improved performance?
- **have mechanisms to review the effectiveness of the scrutiny function:** There is a need for an evaluation of the effectiveness of scrutiny itself. If it’s not working or having an impact don’t be afraid to change it.

*“Involved residents have been recruited for work experience and many have applied for permanent work in the HA.”*

*Asha Sendawula,  
Customer 1st Officer,  
Family Housing Association*



#### Practice example

### Riverside

Young people have influenced services at Riverside's Short Life Housing Scheme by getting support focused on securing employment and suggesting improvements to the communal gardens and environment.

This has built capacity and enabled the delivery of better life skills for example, through individual coaching to run meetings, which has now been built into the support framework for the scheme.

#### Practice example

### AmicusHorizon

AmicusHorizon involve residents in scrutinising and challenging services, which has resulted in tangible service improvements. For example, thanks to their area panels' quarterly monitoring of performance on complaints:

- customer satisfaction is up from 57% in 2009/10 to 100% in September 2011
- quicker complaints response times - 90% were responded to within 10 days in 2009/10, compared to 100% by autumn 2011
- new complaints have reduced from 120 to 26 per month.

#### Practice example

### Helena Partnerships

Helena Partnerships provides independent training and support to the resident members of its Customer Excellence Panel, including offering accredited training through the Chartered Institute of Housing (Level 3 in Resident Scrutiny).

This helps ensure residents carrying out scrutiny are both fully informed and have independent, un-biased information and support on which to base their recommendations. It also offers a personal benefit to residents in return for their commitment.

### Other useful resources

- **Developing Tenant Scrutiny and Co-regulation: lessons from ten co-regulatory champions**, CfPS – plus more information on effective scrutiny, good practice and how to access practical advice and support - [www.cfps.org.uk](http://www.cfps.org.uk)
- **Quality Assured Scrutiny (QAS)** – QAS is a new tenant scrutiny accreditation service from TPAS, HouseMark and CIH. For more information contact [QAS@tpas.org.uk](mailto:QAS@tpas.org.uk)
- **Active Learning for Residents (ALfR)** – ALfR is a programme of qualifications specifically designed for involved residents. A range of qualifications are available including a Level 3 award in Resident Scrutiny - [www.cih.org/ALfR](http://www.cih.org/ALfR)
- **How to... prepare for regulation reform: Tenant engagement and scrutiny** – [www.cih.org/howtobriefings](http://www.cih.org/howtobriefings)
- **Tenant scrutiny now and in the future** (published with TPAS and HouseMark) - [www.cih.org/policypapers](http://www.cih.org/policypapers)
- **Resident-led self regulation: Enhancing in-house scrutiny and performance** - [www.cih.org/policypapers](http://www.cih.org/policypapers)
- **Practice online** - CIH's online good practice resource - [www.cih.org/practiceonline](http://www.cih.org/practiceonline)
- **Scrutiny and Empowerment Partnership (SEP)** - good practice website - [www.tenantadvisor.net](http://www.tenantadvisor.net)
- **SEP accreditation reports** on 'gold award' winning co-regulatory champions Salix Homes and Soha Housing - [www.tenantadvisor.net](http://www.tenantadvisor.net) (news pages, 7 February)
- The Housing Minister has asked the National Tenant Organisations (NTOs) to lead the development of a framework for local tenant panels. A Frontrunners project and an Approved scheme are due in March 2012.

# A Bigger Voice for Tenants

Ten housing providers and their tenants from across the country were asked by the TSA to help others get to grips with co-regulation. More than 2000 tenants and officers from over 250 organisations have already heard what the Co-Regulation Champions have to say about giving tenants a bigger voice in how their landlord is run.



We might all have different approaches, but we all agree that these ingredients are essential for success:

- A genuine belief and commitment to staff and residents working together
- Transparency and accountability
- A formal, constructive challenge from residents
- Building skills and confidence for residents
- Accountability to all residents
- A representative, resident-led voice
- A belief that what residents think is good for them is good for the landlord

But don't take our word for it.

You can meet tenants who are making a real difference to their housing provider at the following events:

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#### The Runway Group

April 2012

[www.theairportgroup.co.uk](http://www.theairportgroup.co.uk)

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#### Developing Tenant Scrutiny national conference

18 April 2012, London

[www.cfps.org.uk](http://www.cfps.org.uk)

020 7187 7362

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#### TPAS conference

16 - 18 July 2012

Birmingham [www.tpasconference.org.uk](http://www.tpasconference.org.uk)

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## Co-Regulation Champions



See [www.coregchamps.co.uk](http://www.coregchamps.co.uk) for useful resources and tips or take a look at our individual websites