UK COLLABORATIVE CENTRE FOR HOUSING EVIDENCE

Tenant participation in the private rented sector

A review of existing evidence

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Executive summary

This report reviews the evidence on tenant participation and activism in the Private Rented Sector (PRS). It looks at UK and international sources of academic and non-academic evidence to explore how tenant activism works and what its impacts are in different contexts. We define participation and activism as any activity in which tenants come together to collectively tackle a housing problem.

Understanding activism in the PRS, including how it can protect and enhance tenants' experiences, is particularly important because the sector has grown substantially over the past decade or so in all parts of the UK. Perhaps most notably, it is now drawing in more low-income households with fewer protections than social housing.

In contrast to social housing, there is currently no legislative requirement for landlords to engage with PRS tenants and most tenant participation in the PRS is bottom-up activism, which is driven and directed by tenants themselves. There is also little research into tenant activism in the PRS, particularly when compared with activism in social housing. The small but diverse evidence base that does exist demonstrates that:

- Activism is stimulated by a range of issues, including the poor physical condition or high cost of housing, a lack of available or suitable housing, poor treatment by landlords, and the repossession, removal, or destruction of suitable housing.
- Activism is built on assets, including skills, money and networks, which may come from tenants themselves or from supportive partners. These assets intersect with opportunities, such as media interest, public consultations, the chance to purchase land or buildings, or political interest in PRS housing.
- Activism encompasses a wide variety of tactics, including occupations of empty properties, petitions, street campaigns, public protests, lobbying of political leaders, and mediation and legal action. The most effective campaigns tend to utilise multiple approaches.

Overall, the outcomes stimulated by activism are non-linear, iterative and take time to become apparent. This makes it difficult to draw firm conclusions about the efficacy of activism in the PRS. What is clear is that:

- Transient and/or vulnerable PRS populations may find the sustained effort required for successful activism particularly challenging and activist groups need to consider the demands on their members to avoid burn-out.
- Activism which focuses primarily on mitigating the impacts of individual housing crises is very important and highly protective for those households, but has limited potential to improve conditions across the PRS long-term.
- Activism geared towards policy change needs to consider strategies for ensuring that policy improvements are effectively implemented, both through adequate enforcement and support for tenants to exercise their (new) rights.

- The most effective activist groups work as much on empowering members and other tenants as they do on achieving immediate campaign goals – driving a positive spiral of empowerment. Empowerment is inherently difficult to measure or fit into a linear 'cause-and-effect' model of understanding.
- For tenants in the UK's PRS to be significantly more empowered than they are today, the power that landlords hold need to be more equitably shared with tenants. This includes the power to make decisions about housing. Whilst significant differences between parts of the UK in terms of PRS regulation have emerged since devolution, none of the constituent nations has yet legislated for tenant participation or shared decision making.
- It is not clear whether or how legislative change may be effective in ensuring that power is better shared between landlords and tenants. Improving the underlying relationships between PRS tenants' and landlords is likely to be essential in empowering PRS tenants.

The main conclusions of this review are that:

- There is a paucity of research evidence relating to tenant activism in the PRS, which needs to be addressed by academia and other bodies with an interest in the wellbeing of PRS tenants. There is a particular lack of research into how PRS tenants might be better supported and empowered within the various legislative contexts of the countries of the UK.
- Despite the diversity and relative transience of the PRS tenants in the UK, effective collective action is possible, has improved the housing conditions of many tenants and has empowered many more.
- There remain significant challenges for tenants in the PRS, particularly those on a low income. Many of the challenges revolve around the need to protect and enforce the rights that tenants already have under existing legislation, a responsibility which currently falls heavily on tenants and tenant-activists.
- Landlords and letting agents should recognise the value of sharing power with tenants – genuinely involving tenants in decision-making can help to sustain tenancies and maintain landlord income, as well as supporting tenants' quality of life, health and wellbeing.
- Policy makers could support improvements in the PRS most effectively by ensuring that tenant activism is facilitated and that the voices of tenants are heard. A more empowered tenant-base in the PRS would be protective of tenants' housing conditions and quality of life.

Introduction

This report describes the findings of a review into the existing evidence on tenant participation and activism in the Private Rented Sector (PRS) from a range of academic and non-academic sources. It sets out to assess how tenant participation in the PRS is initiated, how it develops and what its impacts are, for whom and in what circumstances. The aim is to review and present this evidence in a way that will be practical and useful for tenants in the PRS and those working to support them, as well as policy makers and academics in search of evidence on this topic. This report is primarily aimed at a UK audience, although we hope this review will be of wider interest.

For the purposes of this review, we define participation and activism as any activity in which tenants come together to collectively tackle a housing problem. In some instances, the problem may be being experienced by an individual in the group (e.g. threat of eviction), but the action is a collective effort to support that individual. More commonly, however, activism collectively addresses a problem experienced by many tenants simultaneously, some of whom are typically not part of the activist group. Activism therefore has the potential to benefit not only those who engage in it, but also their peers, either locally, nationally or internationally. By defining activism in this way, we are explicitly excluding actions taken by individual tenants to improve only their own housing situation. In contrast to the current situation in social housing in the UK, most tenant participation in the PRS is bottom-up activism driven by tenants themselves, rather than top-down engagement of tenants by housing providers (1).

While this review covers tenant participation and engagement across the PRS, it particularly focuses on tenants at the lower end of the housing market. Although more affluent households still make up a significant proportion of PRS tenants, they typically have far greater opportunities to secure or improve their housing situation, by virtue of their greater purchasing power. Lower income households are at much greater risk of experiencing a lack of power and autonomy in their housing situation. This cohort are especially important to consider given the recent substantial growth in lower income tenants in the PRS in the UK (2).

The PRS has grown substantially across the UK in the last two decades, showing a 63% increase to 4.5 million households in the ten years to 2017 (3). In England and Northern Ireland the PRS is now larger than the social housing sector, making it the second most common tenure after owner occupation (4) and accounting for around 1 in 5 households (3). In Scotland, where the social housing sector is significantly larger, the PRS has nevertheless trebled as a proportion of households since 1999, accounting for 1 in 6 households by 2017 (3). The rate of increase has been slightly less steep in Wales (5, 6), with the PRS growing by around 50% in the ten years from 2007, so that by 2017 just under 1 in 7 households were living in the PRS (3). This substantial growth is one factor driving policy developments in recent years, which aim to strengthen tenants' rights and living conditions in the PRS, particularly in Scotland and Wales.

Alongside this overall growth in the scale of the sector, there have been some significant changes in the types of households in PRS tenancies. In particular, the parallel stagnation of the social housing sector has led to substantial increases in the number of low-income households, older tenants and households with children, many of whom are also staying in the sector for much longer periods than the traditional stereotype of the PRS as a transitional tenure (2). This dramatic increase in low-income households in PRS has been especially strong over the past ten years and can be seen across the entire working age group. It has occurred throughout the UK, but is particularly strong in Northern Ireland and the south of England. The proportion of children in poor households living in the PRS shows similar patterns of growth and is especially strong for under 5s (7).

Despite this substantial growth and change in tenant composition, there is currently no legislative requirement for PRS landlords to involve tenants in decision-making or service development, contrasting strongly with the legal framework which underpins tenant participation in social housing in each of the nations of the UK. Perhaps as a result of this, there has been a resurgence in tenants' rights organisations/movements in recent years, which have employed a range of strategies to protect and enhance tenant's living conditions, with varying degrees of success.

Whilst there is an established literature regarding tenant participation in social housing that critically explores different forms of participation and their implications for landlords and tenants (1, 8-14), there is minimal evidence regarding tenant participation in the PRS in the UK. Gathering a broader and deeper understanding of the ways in which approaches to tenant participation and activism have been (in)effective, and bringing them together to assess what works for whom and in what circumstances, will further knowledge and understanding of appropriate tenant participation strategies within the PRS. This is set against the background of an increasingly diverse PRS in the UK, a spectrum in which some landlords take an overtly socially responsible role (15,16), while others seek only to maximise profit margins, whatever the implications for tenants.

This report does not set out to review and describe how to 'do' activism in the PRS – there are already a wealth of excellent housing and non-housing resources available for that e.g. (17). Instead, it seeks to explore what work has been undertaken in the PRS by activists (in so much as it has been documented) with a view to bringing this work together to understand what works, for whom and in what circumstances. The hope is this will inspire tenants, activists and the organisations who support them to develop new approaches to longstanding problems, as well as guide landlords and policy makers in the most effective ways to support (particularly, marginalised) tenants within the PRS to take more effective control of their housing conditions.

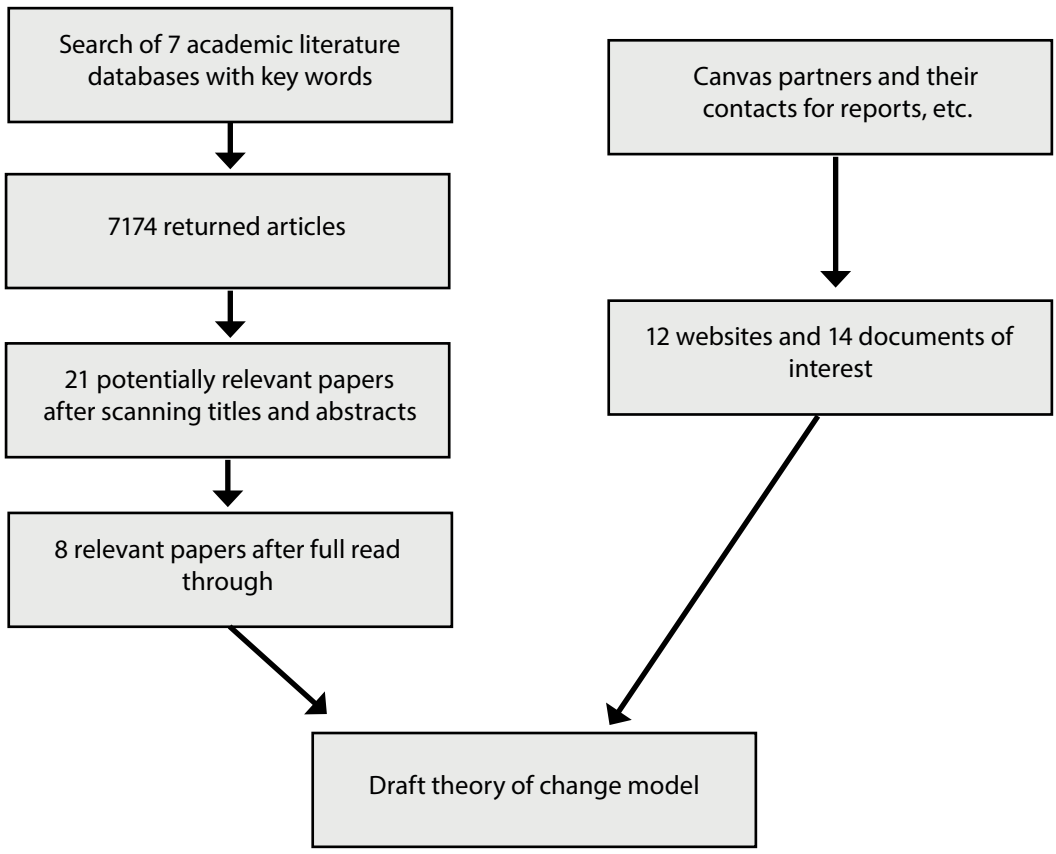
Methodology

This review takes a Realist Synthesis approach that considers existing evidence in the relatively narrow field of tenant participation in the PRS, as well as broader work from related fields, including tenant participation in social housing and more general theories of empowerment.

Fig.1 below summarises the literature returned from our search of the evidence on tenant participation in the PRS, which looked at English-language sources published between 2000 and 2018 (see Appendix A for the key words and databases used in the academic literature search). These limits were set to ensure that the scope of the review was manageable and relevant to the contemporary PRS landscape. This process yielded eight relevant academic papers (see Appendix A for full details), which were recorded using a form (see Appendix B) designed to identify the key environmental conditions and triggers of tenant participation and activism, the main activities engaged in, as well as primary and secondary outcomes.

This was complemented by a search of non-academic sources. We conducted a series of online searches, as well as asking partners to provide additional suggestions and to distribute our request for written evidence (narratives, case studies, numerical data, etc.) to their networks across the PRS. This, alongside reference tracing, yielded a total of 12 websites of interest, as well as 14 separate documents that described tenant activism and/or its outcomes (see Appendix C for full details). These grey literature sources are more UK-focused than the academic literature, reflecting the make-up of our partner network. Each of these sources were also reviewed and summarised using the form in Appendix B.

Fig.1: Methodology



The analysis of these sources was undertaken in three, iterative stages. In the first stage, evidence from both academic and non-academic sources were synthesised into a draft theory of change model, which identified a range of triggers for activism and participation, activities undertaken and housing, policy and other outcomes (both positive and negative). Academic sources contributed more towards the range of longer-term outcomes in this model, whilst non-academic sources provided more detail on the specific activities undertaken and the political and other opportunities that this activism sought to take advantage of. These latter sources were also more contemporary and relevant to the current political climate and housing market of the UK, although they tended to be less rigorous in identifying precisely which activities had resulted in which outcomes.

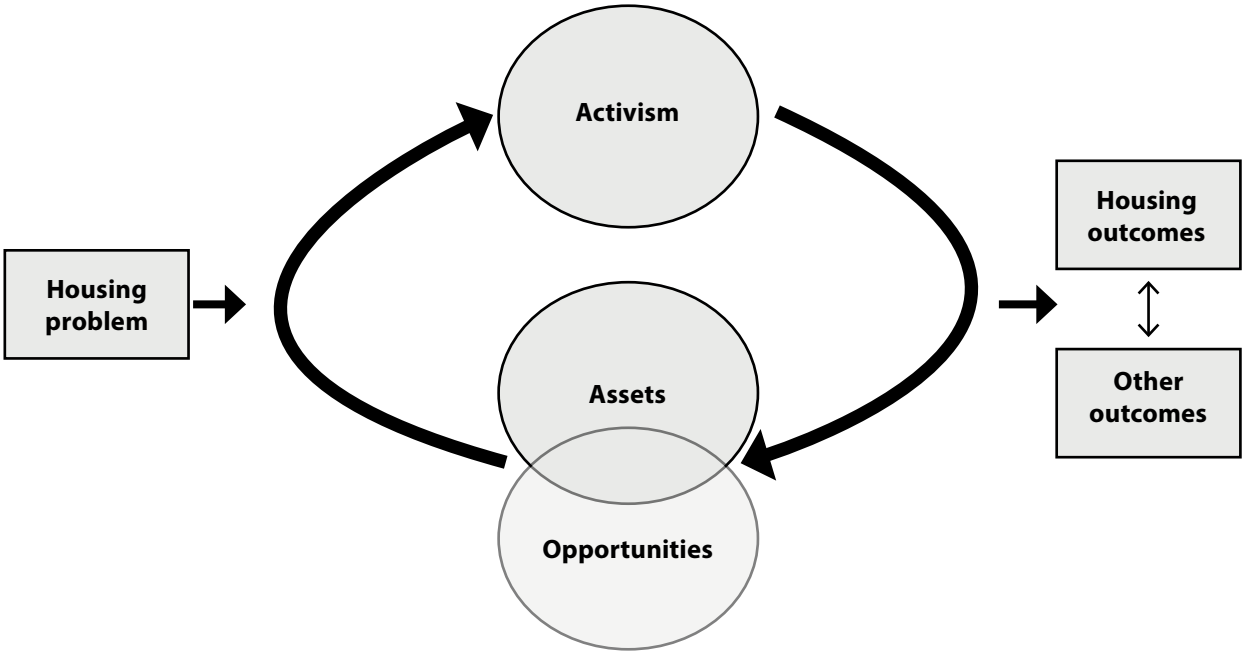
This theory of change model was presented at the CaCHE 'Resident Voice Workshop' in June 2019, which involved a range of stakeholders from housing organisations from across the UK. The aim of this discussion was to identify which elements of the model would be of most value for tenant activists, landlords, housing organisations and policy makers. Participants highlighted the challenges of attributing particular housing and policy outcomes to particular instances of activism and, therefore, the lack of certainty with which statements about causality can be made. On the basis of this feedback, the second stage of our analysis focused on developing our understanding of the 'empowerment cycle' at the core of the theory of change model, by drawing on a wider literature beyond the specific field of tenant participation and activism in the PRS.

In the third and final stage of the analysis, we returned to our original sources on tenant participation in the PRS and reviewed the evidence again in the light of the wider literature on empowerment. We developed four representative case studies to illustrate the diversity of approaches to tenant participation and empowerment, the range of positive and negative outcomes generated, and the important role of context in shaping impacts. This report outlines the findings of each of these three stages of analysis in turn (the theory of change model, the cycle of empowerment and the four case studies), before concluding with implications of the findings for tenants, tenants' organisations, landlords and policy makers.

Theory of change

The first stage of our review suggested that tenant participation and activism impacts upon housing and policy outcomes through the mechanisms described in Fig.2 below. The process begins with a key problem or 'trigger' that prompts tenants to begin to try to influence their housing conditions. This is typically the poor physical condition (18, 19), or high cost of housing (20, 21) (and often these two in combination), but could also be a lack of available and suitable housing (22), poor treatment by a landlord (18), or the repossession, removal, or destruction of suitable housing (19, 23-25).

Fig.2: Theory of Change Model



This triggers an iterative process of activism, which begins with tenants coming together to identify and build upon their collective assets. These might include communication or practical skills held by participants (20, 24), money (either in the withholding of payments such as rent or in the pooling of monetary resources to fund activities) (18, 20), or pre-existing connections and networks, either with other tenants (20) or with those in positions of power (18, 19). These assets intersect with opportunities that arise in the wider environment, which might include media interest (18), public consultation processes (20), the opportunity to purchase land or buildings (24), or political interest (20).

Together, these assets and opportunities are used to develop appropriate activities or actions to be taken by the group in order to further their cause. This could include a wide range of activities, such as the occupation of empty properties (22), petitions, street campaigns and public protests (23), targeted discussions with political leaders or influencers (19-21, 23, 26), mediation (23), or legal action against specific landlords (18, 22, 24). Whilst these actions typically progress the group towards their goal, they rarely result in the desired outcome immediately. However, they often enable the group to build further assets (e.g. political allies, public favour) and/or to generate further opportunities (e.g. pushing politicians to engage with the subject), which, in turn, provide a basis for further, often different, actions and further progress towards the end goal.

As such, effective activism does not simply consist of short-lived activities that utilise a discrete reservoir of assets

at any given time, but is a progressive, iterative process that involves the building of assets, through a series of cumulative activities over a long period of time. As it progresses, this process secures increasing power for tenants, so that they are able to influence housing and policy outcomes to the desired degree, in order to reach their goal. This cycle of increasing empowerment is, of course, not guaranteed in all circumstances, since other key players in the process may resist that empowerment and seek to undermine any gains (18, 23, 25). Furthermore, activists may lose assets (27), fail to take effective advantage of opportunities, or find that opportunities disappear, which can undermine both the process of empowerment and potential housing outcomes. Indeed, in some instances, these kinds of issues may lead to unintended, negative housing or other outcomes, including eviction and personal stress.

Finally, it is worth considering the diversity of potential outcomes from activism and whether they accrue to those participating in activism or to a wider group. Activists themselves often experience deeper, more numerous and/or entirely different outcomes from the wider population. On one hand, individual activists may be severely disadvantaged by their participation, e.g. by being evicted from their homes (20), being prosecuted (22), or by experiencing stress, anxiety and frustration (25, 27). On the other, there may be a host of positive personal outcomes, which might include improved confidence (25), new or improved skills (27), or improved housing conditions (18, 24).

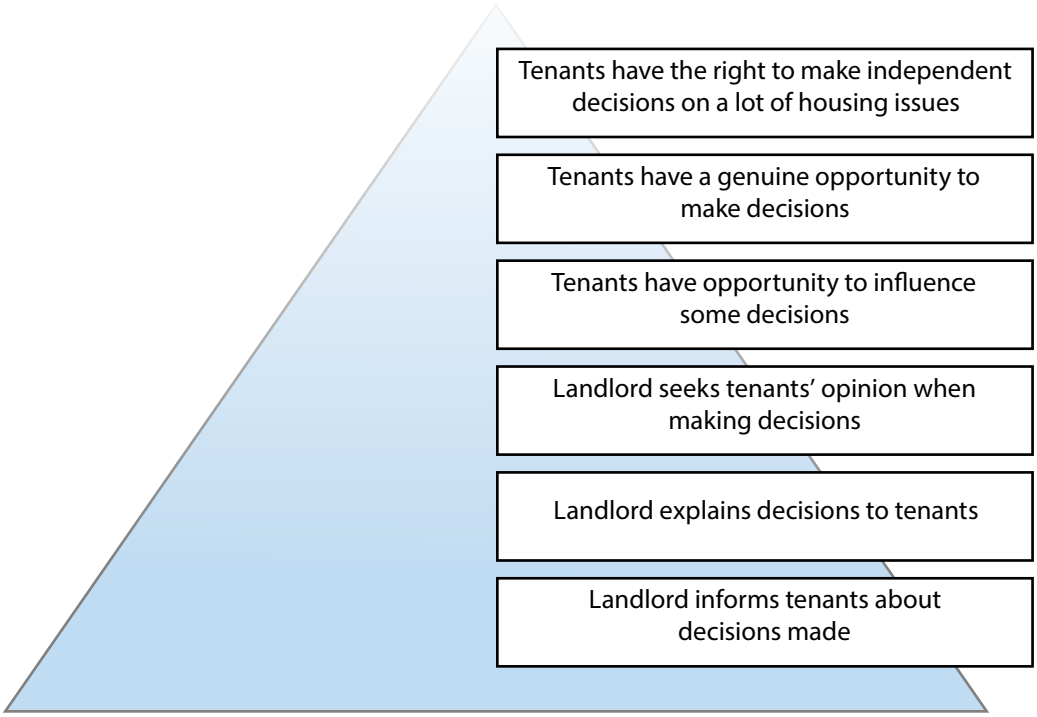
These individual outcomes can vary substantially across those involved in just one activist movement and at least some are likely to result regardless of whether collective gains in empowerment or housing or policy outcomes are achieved. As such, it could be argued that there is no linear process of Housing Problem -> Activism -> Housing and Policy Outcomes, as outcomes from the process of activism are often not coherent, uniformly positive or easily attributable to a single action. The theory of change model in Fig.2 therefore acknowledges the complex and often non-linear processes involved in tenant participation and activism.

Against this background, the small but diverse body of evidence currently available on tenant participation in the PRS does not permit us to come to firm conclusions about the most (or, indeed, the least) effective forms of participation and activism in specific contexts within the PRS. However, this model does emphasise the processes of tenant empowerment, which appear to underlie all of the examples of effective activism described within the available literature. The next section of this report therefore focuses on this central cycle of tenant empowerment, drawing on wider sources of evidence to elucidate processes which build assets, harness opportunities and engage people in activism.

Empowerment

Outside of the literature on tenant participation in the PRS, there is an extensive literature on empowerment and, in particular, tenant empowerment in the social rented sector. We found Suszynska's (28) ladder of tenant participation to be a useful and easily transferable framework within which to understand tenant empowerment in the PRS. This draws heavily on Arnstein's (29) original conception of the ladder of participation and is shown in Fig.3 below.

Fig.3: 'Levels of tenant participation according to H. Ward, compiled by the authors on the basis of (Ward 1992, p.153)' in Suszynska (2015).

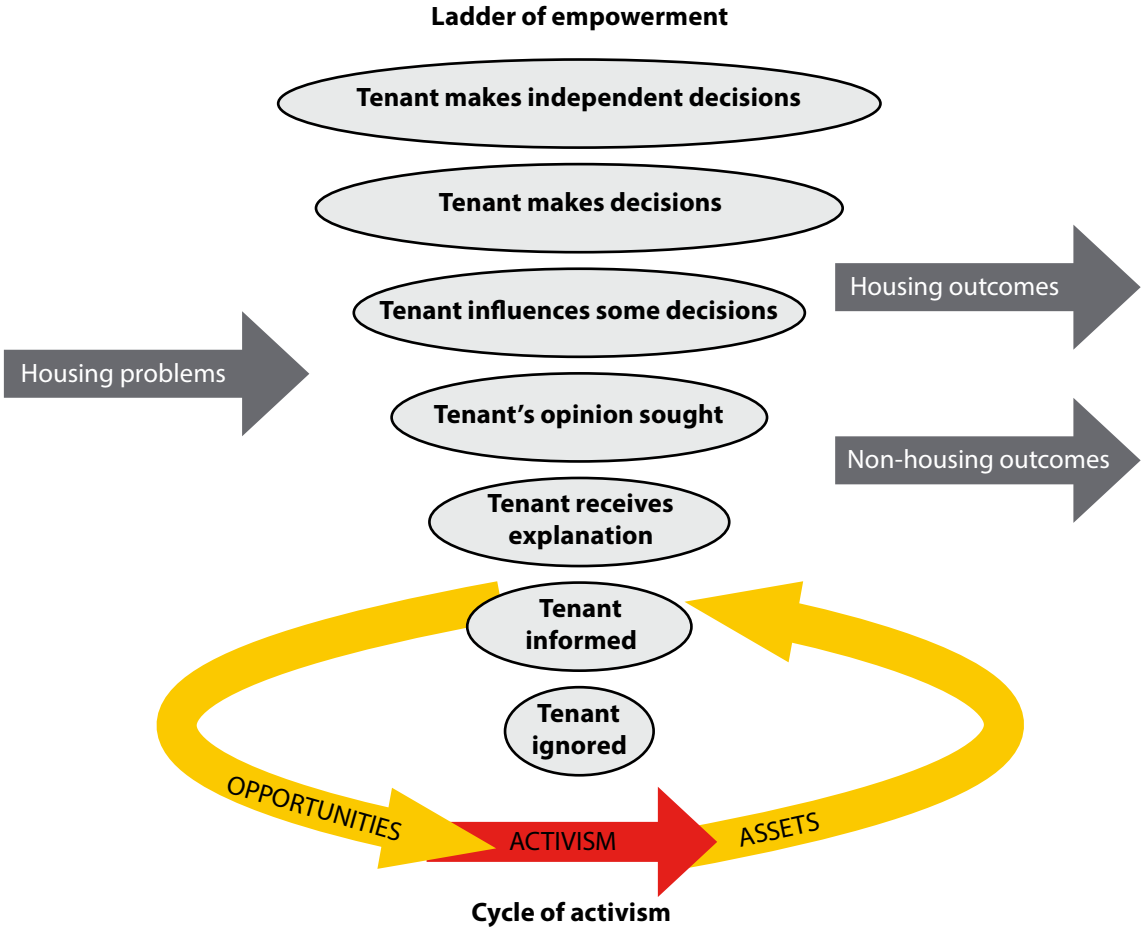


Although this ladder is entitled 'levels of tenant participation', we would argue that, in this context, it is more useful to think about it as a ladder of tenant empowerment: as tenants move up the ladder, they are increasingly able to influence and control their own housing. This includes access to housing, as well as the full beneficial use of it.

Participation, in and of itself, does not necessarily mean that tenants will secure the advantages described in this ladder, as this also requires landlords to cede some power to tenants. It is successful tenant activism, underpinned by the use of collective assets and taking advantage of intermittent opportunities, which secures this co-operation and progression. This may work through the enactment of new housing policy, which compels landlords to cede power to tenants, or through successful mediation and relationship-building with landlords. This in turn, secures housing and other positive outcomes for tenants, although ongoing tenant participation is required to maintain any power acquired. It should also be noted that we would extend this ladder downwards by at least one rung, to include a baseline at which a landlord ignores tenants and their needs.

This notion of a ladder of empowerment can be usefully combined with the theory of change model derived from the literature in Fig.2 above, to create a more holistic model that encompasses activism, empowerment and outcomes, as shown in Fig.4 below. In so doing, the cycle of tenant activism at the core of the model might be better conceptualised as a spiral. Where activism is able to productively build on assets and opportunities, this can move tenants up the ladder of empowerment, enabling them to gain more control over their housing. Equally, where activism fails, assets are lost, or opportunities disappear, the spiral may reverse, causing tenants to lose control over their housing situation. This notion of 'spiralling up' or 'spiralling down' draws on the wider literature around empowerment, particularly that by Emery and Flora (30).

Fig.4: The ladder of empowerment and cycle of activism in a housing context



While complex, this approach to understanding and appraising tenant activism in terms of empowerment outcomes has a number advantages over a linear model focussed primarily on housing or policy outcomes. First, it recognises that gains are relative to local housing conditions, cultures and practices in the PRS. Moving from, for example, 'landlord informs tenants about decisions made' to 'landlord explains decisions to tenants' may not materially change housing conditions. However, it is likely to improve (if not entirely resolve) tenants' understanding and sense of control over their housing situation, whatever that may be. While not resulting in measurable improvements in the condition of a particular property or properties, this may nevertheless be a significant and hard-won gain for some tenants in some contexts in the PRS and pave the way for future material improvements.

Moreover, this ladder provides a more aspirational and preventative approach to understanding how housing problems might be tackled collectively by tenants. Whilst changes in policy or material housing conditions are obviously central to any assessment of the gains of tenant participation and activism, there are a much wider range of positive (and negative) outcomes related to tenant empowerment, which do not fall into these categories. While these may be more difficult to quantify, their impacts may be more enduring than one-off material improvements in a limited number of properties, as well as having a more immediate impact on tenants than changes to housing policy. Understanding tenant activism as an iterative process of progression towards greater empowerment for tenants recognises a much wider range of potential 'successful' outcomes, which lay the groundwork for longer-term, sustainable improvements in the housing situations of (particularly, vulnerable) PRS tenants.

In exploring the ways in which tenant activism may enable a spiralling up of the ladder of tenant empowerment in different contexts, it is worth remembering that more affluent tenants in the PRS are much more likely to already have the power to make decisions about their housing, using their income to 'shop around' and achieve what they need. Generally speaking, therefore, it is those with little choice in the housing market who find themselves at the foot of this ladder and stand to gain the most from activism that successfully empowers tenants (2). It is therefore also important to consider whether the power activism generates for tenants is distributed equitably, for example across incomes, genders, ethnicities, ages, disabilities and household types, so as to avoid exacerbating already deep inequalities in access to housing.

Case studies

This section details four case studies selected from the reviewed literature on tenant participation in the PRS. While these do not (and could not) represent the full diversity of the evidence base, they have been selected to demonstrate key themes that cut across the literature, in terms of the change that is possible, as well as the wide variety of activities, assets and opportunities used to attain outcomes.

Case study A: Eviction Resistance (London, UK)

Eviction Resistance establish and train local networks of tenants to delay evictions using non-violent direct action. The aim is to buy time for tenants facing eviction to enable them to negotiate with their landlord, organise somewhere else to live and cope with the mental health impacts of their situation. Their approach is underlain by a tenant's fundamental right to housing, regardless of their financial or legal situation. Eviction Resistance is a member of Radical Housing Network, an umbrella organisation of over 30 activist groups from across London's housing sectors.

Housing problem

The primary housing problem addressed by this group is (imminent) eviction, though this is typically underlain by poor housing quality and a lack of repair, high housing costs, low or interrupted income for the tenant, or tenants' health difficulties. Tenants have typically sought assistance from elsewhere before coming to the group, but the support on offer has been either too generic or too focussed on the legal process of eviction.

Activism and Empowerment

By the time tenants reach the attention of the group, they are often in acute and immediate need. They are very much at the bottom of the empowerment ladder, as their need to be housed is being ignored/actively resisted by their landlord.

The group's core assets are their ability to communicate well and be physically present, en masse, at the eviction address for a number of hours on the appropriate day. Skills in supporting tenants' emotional needs, dealing with media attention and dealing appropriately with face-to-face challenges from both bailiffs and police are key to the success of the group's aims. Appointing separate, experienced, skilled and available people to handle each of these tasks is important, as is reflecting on successes as well as failures in developing skills and techniques. The Radical Housing Network, of which Eviction Resistance is a part, are likely to be key to building these assets, through sharing wider learning and experience.

Outcomes

Where the group is successful, the primary housing outcome is the delay of a tenant's eviction and the immediate prevention of homelessness. Non-housing outcomes include practical and emotional support in coping with the eviction process, as well a sense of self-value and usefulness for activists in resisting other tenants' attempted evictions. In some cases, this process may open up a dialogue between a tenant and landlord, allowing longstanding issues with the property or tenancy to be reduced or resolved.

There are therefore a wide range of ways in which Eviction Resistance works to empower tenants. Where a dialogue is opened with a landlord, or the tenant is able to use the eviction delay to move to a property with a more sensitive landlord, that tenant may move 'up' the ladder of empowerment and have greater influence over their housing situation going forward.

Through the process of being supported by and becoming part of Eviction Resistance, tenants also have an opportunity to realise their own power and draw upon that in future tenancies. This is likely to be especially important where their move is to a(nother) property in which they have a low level of power and control, owing to their marginalised position within the housing market.

Summary

Eviction Resistance's ability to draw on a range of mediation, emotional support and media management skills, often at very short notice, can generate significant outcomes in relation to tenants' immediate housing situation and ability to cope. These are clearly crucial for the tenants concerned.

However, there are questions about the extent to which such activism can generate collective improvements in tenants' empowerment over the long term. If tenants ultimately leave their tenancy, whether they are evicted or use the delay to find an alternative tenancy, that tenancy (with all its attendant issues) remains for another potentially vulnerable tenant to take up. While it could be argued that sustained and repeated resistance to eviction may eventually dissuade landlords from pursuing it, there is nevertheless a significant emotional cost paid by tenants subject to eviction.

Sources

Wilde, M. (2017). "Embryonic alternatives to London's housing crisis." Anthropology Today 33(5): 16-19

Eviction Resistance website: https://evictionresistance.squat.net/

Radical Housing Network website: http://radicalhousingnetwork.org/

Case study B: Private Tenants Forum (Northern Ireland)

The Private Tenants Forum was established in 2012 by Housing Rights, a charity offering housing advice and advocacy across Northern Ireland's housing sectors. It was funded by the Oak Foundation. The aim was to provide a space in which private rented sector tenants could share their experiences and views and be supported to actively influence housing policy and legislation in Northern Ireland. Over its three-year lifetime, the Forum had no more than 20 members at any given time, but was more typically attended by 5-10 individuals.

Housing problems

The Forum was established because Housing Rights recognised there was a lack of tenant voice in housing policy-making and campaigning in Northern Ireland. All members were invited to volunteer on the Forum due to their experiences of housing problems when living in the PRS, including unaffordability of the sector (especially in the charging of up-front fees), poor housing quality, and dishonesty and irresponsibility on the part of landlords, all of which were underlain by a considerable lack of regulation in the sector.

Empowerment

Many members were at the foot of the empowerment ladder on joining the Forum, having approached Housing Rights for advice and support with their various housing problems (with varying degrees of success). The Forum provided an opportunity to discuss potential solutions to these problems, not at an individual level, but for tenants across the sector.

The Forum was funded, led and directed by staff at Housing Rights and members were engaged in field research, the design of information about rights and responsibilities for tenants in the PRS and the development of a manifesto for policy makers. This direction was a vital asset, without which the establishment and continuation of the Forum would not have been possible.

Members faced a number of challenges, including difficulty establishing a set of agreed priorities for the PRS, owing to the great diversity of both membership of the Forum and members' experiences, as well as the transitory nature of tenancies in the sector. Furthermore, staff at Housing Rights faced challenges in recruiting and retaining members. Overall, there was some debate about whether the Forum should be tenant-led to a greater degree, how such an enterprise could be supported and what it might be able to achieve.

Outcomes

Members of the Forum reported various benefits from taking part, including an enhancement of their skills, feeling more informed, feeling more able to challenge poor practices in the PRS in future and feeling they had made a valuable contribution in sharing their experiences and opinions. This experience clearly moved those individuals up the ladder of empowerment.

Moreover, the Forum's research prompted NI Trading Standards to discuss improvements to lettings contracts with PRS lettings agencies, and their information about rights and responsibilities for tenants was shared by organisations across the sector. The research was also used as evidence in legal challenges to lettings agencies. This influence is therefore likely to have curbed some of the poorest practices in the sector, particularly the charging of 'up-front' fees, and provided vital information to tenants, incrementally moving a much larger number of tenants up the ladder of empowerment.

Finally, the Forum's development of a policy Agenda for Action in the PRS had the potential to have significant impacts in housing legislation in Northern Ireland, giving tenants the opportunity to influence decisions with a wide-ranging impact. However, although a government department produced proposals to regulate the PRS, based

partly on input from the Forum, the suspension of the Northern Irish government has meant that these are yet to be progressed and the political opportunity to impact more deeply across a much wider population of private renters has stalled. The Forum itself was suspended partly as a result of this situation, but also because the funding for the project came to an end, although Housing Rights have recently secured new funding for similar work that will involve some of the Forum's original members.

Summary

Participation in the Private Tenants' Forum has empowered those taking part, by providing them with some influence over letting agencies' practices and by improving their confidence to challenge poor housing conditions. Moreover, their information campaign about living in the PRS has increased the likelihood that a wider cohort of tenants will be better informed about their tenancies.

However, the lack of political opportunity to influence wider policy decisions about the PRS in Northern Ireland has inhibited further impacts. Once the key asset of guidance and support from Housing Rights ended, the Forum largely dissolved, raising important questions about how a group not founded by tenants themselves might become self-sustaining over the longer term.

Sources

Bridging the Gap Final report – Private Tenants' Forum - March 2015

Private Tenants Forum. Agenda for Action. Northern Ireland, Housing Rights Service

Housing Rights Northern Ireland. (2018). Housing Rights Professional Resource on: Letting Fees in the Private Rented Sector. Belfast, Housing Rights.

Telephone conversation with Murray Watt, Community Development, Information and Policy Officer @ Supporting Communities NI –17-04-19

Telephone conversation with Janet Hunter, Director, Housing Rights NI –24-04-19

Case study C: Living Rent (Scotland)

Living Rent was founded in 2014 by ACORN, the Nation Union of Students and Edinburgh Private Tenant's Group, with the aim of influencing ongoing policy reform in Scotland's private rented sector. It is a community union for tenants, run and primarily funded by its membership, but also receives some charitable grants.

Housing problems

Living Rent is primarily concerned with the high levels of rent and other costs charged to tenants, including the rate of inflation of these costs, as well as poor housing quality. Insecurity of tenure tends to prevent tenants from addressing these problems in their own tenancies and an increasing proportion of the population living in the PRS has meant this problem has become an increasingly widespread issue in recent years.

Empowerment

Living Rent formed in response to a significant political opportunity to influence a Scottish Government consultation and legislative process designed to better regulate the PRS in Scotland. Members set out to influence this process by engaging with and discussing housing problems and solutions with Members of the Scottish Parliament, as well as raising public support through a variety of campaigns. These included street stalls, social media, door-knocking and petitions, which in turn put further pressure on government to listen to the input of Living Rent.

Key assets included affiliations with established organisations and unions, which gave the campaign credibility with both the public and politicians alike, as well as training from ACORN, which allowed the group to draw on established methods and a wealth of experience.

Alongside this, Living Rent has established a number of local branches across Scotland focussed on local housing issues, including the provision of advice and peer support for members subject to unreasonable practices by landlords. These smaller scale activities empower those taking part to directly defend their rights, pushing for better quality and more affordable housing. Branches can come together to discuss, debate and propose solutions for longstanding issues and work together, drawing on their local and organisation-wide assets, to improve their housing outcomes.

Outcomes

Living Rent argue that rent controls and greater security of tenure must go hand-in-hand in any new legislation. As a result of their campaign and consultation with other stakeholders in Scotland's PRS, the Scottish Government brought in new legislation in 2016 that ended fixed term tenancies, reduced the grounds for eviction – including the removal of 'no fault' evictions – and introduced the ability for Local Authorities to intervene in rent levels in areas it deemed to be under 'rent pressure'. The legislation also introduced a new Tribunal structure in which disputes between tenants and landlords will be mediated.

In theory, this new legislation should empower tenants across Scotland to push back against poor housing conditions and unreasonable charges, with significantly less threat to their tenancy, as a result moving them incrementally up the ladder of empowerment. However, Living Rent recognise that, on the whole, PRS tenants are still vulnerable and far from fully empowered by this legislative change. This is particularly the case with regards to rent controls, which require local authority action and have not, as yet, been implemented anywhere in Scotland due to the challenging nature of the process. The campaign for legislative change therefore continues, alongside practical support for tenants experiencing the poorest conditions in the PRS.

Summary

Living Rent relies upon the involvement and active contribution of members, both monetarily and in terms of their time, knowledge and skills, to operate effectively – this, alongside its links to other supporting organisations, are its key assets. Now that the initial political opportunity of public consultation on PRS legislation has passed, Living Rent is using these assets to establish local branches around core, local issues, still reaching tenants collectively, but at a smaller scale.

This local work is especially important in realising the benefits of the Scotland's new PRS legislation. While it does much to protect tenants from the poorest PRS conditions and experiences, it is only by tenants exercising their new rights that they will be more empowered and have greater control over their housing conditions. Many tenants are likely to require support in order to do this.

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Saunders, E., Samuels, K. and Statham, D. Rebuilding a Scottish Housing Movement: A Scottish Union of Tenants, Social Policy, Summer 2016, pp.46-50.

Living Rent website: https://www.livingrent.org/

Case Study D: Oak Park Tenants Association (California, USA)

The tenants of Oak Park Apartments, Oakland, California were primarily migrants with low paid and insecure employment opportunities, facing discrimination in the housing market. Tenants came from a range of ethnic minority backgrounds and spoke a variety of languages. While there were strong and significant social ties within ethnic groups in the block, relations across groups were often strained. Oak Park Tenants Association was a multi-ethnic group, brought together by volunteers of Oak Park Ministries, who were also resident in the block. They initially offered support to families in need of immigration and legal advice and English language skill development.

Housing problems

The Association was formed in the late 1990s after members recognised that they faced common problems and concerns around the quality of the housing, which was very poor, and the way they were treated by the building's owners. They also saw that there was a lack of awareness among tenants about their housing rights and a reluctance to challenge landlords, particularly if this involved appealing to authorities.

Empowerment

To begin with, tenants were very much at the base of the empowerment ladder, their concerns being ignored by their landlord – indeed, many residents were afraid to raise any complaints with the landlord at all. It was the key asset of the Oak Park Ministries volunteers, and Harbor House Urban Christian Ministry, which supported them, that enabled Oak Park Tenants Association to form. Brought together by Ministry volunteers, tenants got to know their neighbours and formed relationships across ethnic groups. This provided the trust and familiarity that was needed to work collaboratively, despite their diversity.

A second key asset was the provision of free legal advice and support. When mediation with the landlord was unsuccessful, the Association decided to sue the landlord. A local legal assistance centre provided contact with a lawyer who agreed to take on the case on a 'no-win-no-fee' basis, although this was bolstered by Oak Park Association members convincing the majority of tenants in the block to join the case.

In a sense the landlords themselves provided an opportunity for the Association to secure this support by raising rents after mediation failed, making it easier for members to persuade other tenants to join the action. Successfully harnessed media attention and local government support, aided by activists' personal connections, added to the pressure on the landlords. Although the landlords filed for bankruptcy, the Association agreed a settlement that saw the building improved to a minimum standard and converted to affordable housing, as well as financial compensation for those tenants who took part in the suit.

Outcomes

Overall, the outcome of this activism was significant movement up the ladder of empowerment for Oak Park tenants. However, the Association's case against the landlord went on for almost four years, during which time many individual tenants moved away from the building, either because they could no longer tolerate the (deteriorating) conditions, or because they found better opportunities elsewhere. As such, the housing outcomes of this activism were very much for the future collective of Oak Park tenants.

Summary

This case highlights the pivotal importance of legal expertise as a key asset, without which tenants' efforts would not have been successful. It also demonstrates the way in which tenants can work through differences in language and culture, come together around a common need and achieve an outcome for collective benefit.

Nevertheless, the core outcome of this activism resulted in these tenancies being removed from the PRS, as they are

now owned and managed by the not-for-profit East Bay Asian Local Development Corporation, for the benefit of the local community. As such, although tenants elevated themselves from the very bottom of the ladder to somewhere nearer the top, this high level of empowerment necessitated a move out of the PRS.

Sources

Jeung, R. (2006). Faith-based multiethnic tenant organizing: the Oak Park story. Religion and social justice for immigrants. P. Hondagneu-Sotelo. New Jersey, Rutgers University Press: 59-73.

East Bay Asian Local Development Corporation website: https://ebaldc.org/

Case studies - summary

These four case studies demonstrate that activism can describe a wide range of activities, from those which aim to reach policy-makers (e.g. political lobbying and media work), to those which aim to confront or open up a dialogue with landlords and letting agents (e.g. petitioning, picketing, mediation), to those which provide one-to-one protection of and support for tenants in need (e.g. emotional support, tailored advice). In particular, they demonstrate that activism that combines multiple, complementary approaches across this spectrum can be highly effective in spiralling PRS tenants up the ladder of empowerment.

Effective activism relies upon the continuous and effective development and employment of relevant assets in order to reach desired goals. While the necessary assets clearly depend on the context in which the activism is taking place, all four of these case studies demonstrate that the involvement of people who are motivated, have first-hand experience of the issues, and are freely willing to give up their time to support others are key. Eviction Resistance and Oak Park Tenants Association, in particular, demonstrate how much time and emotional investment can be demanded of activists, particularly when the specific problem being addressed includes their own, current home.

All four cases also demonstrate how crucial specific skills, such as political lobbying, media handling and legal expertise can be in tackling certain problems. These assets may be possessed by activists themselves, as in the cases of Eviction Resistance and Living Rent, and/or 'borrowed' from those outside the group, as shown by Oak Park Tenants Association and the Private Tenants Forum. The latter case, however, demonstrates how fragile activism can be when assets are primarily generated from outside, as this can make it difficult for tenants to take ownership of and carry forward the process of activism once these assets are diverted elsewhere.

The centrality of strong relationships and their role in building trust and setting mutually agreed goals is also clear from these case studies. Pre-existing relationships, as well as the ability to build new ones, are therefore important assets for any activist group to possess. In the case of Oak Park Tenants Association, it was necessary to build trust among tenants for a number of years before activism could get underway, while Living Rent demonstrates how important external relationships can be in securing political power. It is these relationships that allow any activist group to mobilise their assets effectively in the face of new opportunities.

In terms of opportunities, both Living Rent and the Private Tenants Forum demonstrate the potential potency of activism directed at pre-existing political opportunities, as well as their fragility. Meanwhile, Oak Park Tenants Association demonstrates how effective, albeit labour intensive, it can be for activists to generate their own opportunities for influence. Eviction Resistance, Oak Park Tenants Association and Living Rent illustrate the value in generating and harnessing media interest, as a means of creating political opportunities to influence decision-making by authorities at both the local and national scale.

Finally, in terms of empowerment, these case studies highlight the significant diversity in both who is empowered by tenant activism and to what degree. Living Rent's activism had important impacts across the whole of Scotland's PRS. Oak Park Tenants Association, on the other hand, empowered a much smaller number of tenants, although they were arguably empowered to a much greater degree. In comparing these two cases, there appears to be something of a trade-off between how many tenants can be empowered and to what extent.

As such, it is important that the lessons learned from tenant activism in the PRS are documented and shared by activists, to enable successful strategies to be adapted and employed elsewhere. While improvements in housing policy are of central importance for PRS tenants as a whole, the case of the Private Tenants Forum demonstrates that relying solely on this approach to tenant empowerment is unwise. As the case of Living Rent shows, these strategies need to be complemented by broader tenant empowerment strategies that, at the very least, encourage tenants to engage with any new rights that legislation provides and ensure that these are enforced.

All four of these case studies demonstrate that change, especially where it is large-scale or especially deep, takes

time to secure and is likely to require sustained effort on the part of activists. As demonstrated most clearly by the case of Oak Park Tenants Association, the time it takes for the outcomes of activism to come to fruition may mean that individual activists cease to personally benefit (at least in terms of housing outcomes) from their involvement. This is particularly true in the PRS, where tenants tend to be more transient than in social housing. Activism by those who seek only to improve their own, individual housing outcomes is therefore unlikely to result in significant empowerment. It is also important to consider which groups are potentially being excluded from the empowerment that activism can generate, as well as whose assets (in time, energy, finance, etc.) are being drawn upon to achieve outcomes.

These case studies raise one final question about how far it is possible to empower tenants in the PRS. The ladders of tenant participation and empowerment in Figs.3 and 4 originate from analyses of social housing, where private interests do not compete with those of tenants. Indeed, the case of Oak Park Tenants Association showed the most dramatic improvements in tenant empowerment, but this resulted from tenancies being moved out of the PRS altogether. In order for tenants remaining in the PRS to reach the top of the empowerment ladder and influence or make decisions about their housing, some of the power held by PRS landlords needs to be given up to tenants.

Such a shift in power, from landlords to tenants, would require a significant improvement in the collective relationships between (especially, vulnerable) tenants and landlords. Legislative control of abusive landlords is certainly a foundation step toward this. But beyond this, it may be necessary for tenant activists to approach landlords as a potential asset in moving PRS tenants up the ladder of empowerment, through building mutually respectful relationships based on humanity and trust, in which power can be more equitably shared.

Whether such an approach is possible in an 'open' private market, where investors prioritise housing's exchange and asset value over its use value (33, 34), remains an open question (26). Where landlords are unwilling to cede this power, there remain fundamental questions about how much tenants in the PRS can be empowered and what impacts this is likely to have on housing outcomes, quality of life and health and wellbeing, particularly for the most vulnerable.

Returning to the model of tenant empowerment in Figure 4, this review may offer insights into the potential effects of the different approaches being taken to PRS regulation across the devolved administrations of the UK. In terms of the empowerment of individual tenants, legislative interventions such as the restriction of 'no-fault evictions' in Scotland may go some way to increase security for tenants. However, evidence from Ireland (35) raises concerns about the extent to which the most vulnerable tenants are able to exercise such rights.

Future legislative intervention must therefore consider how new rights will realistically be enforced in each of the constituent countries of the UK and on whom the responsibility for doing so falls. Effective models of tenant participation, and particularly the ways in which they might be replicated in the PRS within the UK's various legislative frameworks, is an area in which future research may prove useful. In considering the potential role of new legislation, it would be useful to consider how tenants in various situations might be genuinely empowered by their participation, including the role of government and landlords in generating that empowerment.

Conclusions and implications

This review has demonstrated that, across a range of different contexts, tenants in the PRS can and do collectively employ their assets to take advantage of opportunities and empower themselves, resulting in both housing and non-housing outcomes. For tenants and tenants' organisations in the PRS, we hope this review provides inspiration, an overview of common successes and challenges, as well as a potential framework against which to review previous activism or plan next steps.

For those landlords and letting agents who are concerned about supporting tenants' quality of life, we hope this review demonstrates the importance of sharing power, not just in informing and seeking the opinion of tenants, but in genuinely putting decision-making in their hands. This applies across both the private and social rented sectors.

Finally, this review holds a number of points for policy makers. Much of the tenant activism covered by this review involves tenants working intensively to protect their basic rights to reasonable housing, either through an improvement in legislation or through the enforcement of existing legal protections. More effective legislation and enforcement that better protect tenants from sitting at the very foot of the empowerment ladder would not only improve their housing and other outcomes, but would enable the energy expended by activists to be used to further empower tenants in a more progressive way.

Moreover, it is clear from this review that there is an appetite for improved legislation, which goes beyond protecting tenants from abuse by irresponsible landlords, to enhance their rights and empower them to shape and protect their own housing outcomes in the PRS. In conducting this review, we have been mindful of the issue of who participates, to what ends and for whom, yet we have resisted the assumption that more (and more active) participation by a more diverse group of tenants is the (only) solution to the housing problems within the PRS.

While this review demonstrates that a wide variety of tenants in the PRS are willing and able to invest considerable time and energy in activism, not all tenants are able to do so, nor should they be expected to do so in order to protect their basic rights. If housing outcomes are to improve within the PRS, particularly for the most vulnerable households, the responsibility to engage with activists sits equally with policy makers and landlords. It is only through generating assets, in the form of relationships between landlords and tenants, as well as opportunities, in the form of processes through which legislation and its enforcement can be shaped, that tenants in the PRS can move substantially up the ladder of empowerment and enjoy decent quality housing and quality of life.

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Appendix A: Acedmic search details

Key words:

- 'private rented sector'
- PRS
- renting
- tenan*
- letting
- landlord

(all joined by OR)

AND

- Participation
- Engagement
- activis*
- action
- movement

(all joined by OR)

Databases:

- SocINDEX – 484 returns, 20 potentially relevant papers
- Scopus –16 returns, 0 new relevant papers
- Web of Science – 5506 returns, ordered by relevance, scan of the first 200, nothing new of relevance
- ASSIA –164 returns, 1 potentially relevant paper
- IBSS –770 returns, ordered by relevance, scan of the first 200, nothing new of relevance
- Public Affairs Index -105 returns, 0 new relevant papers
- Public Science Complete –129 returns, 0 new relevant papers

Exclusions:

- Papers referring explicitly/wholly to social housing
- Papers about public participation in planning without explicit reference to housing
- Papers on (private) renting of farmland and associated activism
- Movements/activism stemming from tenants' organizations but not actually about housing issues
- Activism only by owners/co-op owners
- Anything about stock transfer

Final papers:

Jeung R. Faith-based multiethnic tenant organizing: the Oak Park story. In: Hondagneu-Sotelo P, editor. Religion and social justice for immigrants. New Jersey: Rutgers University Press; 2006. p. 59-73.

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Tobias J. Meet the rising new housing movement that wasnts to create homes for all. The Nation. 2018 June 18-25.

Appendix B: Literature review form

		Comments
Article ID (Endnote)		
Date read		
Title		
Author(s)		
Brief description of study		
Key theory of change		
Country/ies		

Methodology

Qualitative	Quantitative	Mixed	No of participants	No of case studies

Description of methodology	Caveats/comments

Theories

Wider context	Participation & engagement	Activism	Outcomes

Other comments

Appendix C: Grey literature sources

Websites

London Renters Union: http://londonrentersunion.org

Generation Rent (National Private Tenants Organisation Ltd) : www.generationrent.org

Living Rent (Scotland's Tenants' Union): www.livingrent.org

ACORN: www.acorntheunion.org.uk

Radical Housing Network: http://raidcalhousingnetwork.org

Shelter Scotland: www.shelter.scotland.org.uk

Weslo property management: www.wesloproperty.co.uk

Housing Rights (NI): www.housingrights.org.uk

Let down in Wales: http://letdown.wales

TPAS: www.tpas.org.uk

Edinburgh Tenants Federation: www.edinburghtenants.org.uk

Trust for London: www.trustforlondon.org.uk

Documents

Private Tenants' Forum: a response to the Private Rented Sector Review. Housing Rights: Jan 2016.

Private Tenants' Forum: Agenda for Action. Housing Rights Service.

Private Tenants' Forum: Bridging the Gap final report. Housing Rights: March 2015.

Tenant Participation: making a difference. Issue 020. Scottish Government: March 2019.

It's Time for Rent Control – Londoners certainly think so. James Murray. Inside Housing: April 2019.

Generation Rent: the national voice of private renters – annual report 2018.

Views and experiences of tenants in the Private Rented Sector in Scotland. Housing Regeneration and Planning: Research Findings no. 29/2009. Scottish Government: 2009.

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Poll reveals 'overwhelming support' for rent controls across Scotland. Scottish Housing News: 11 April 2019.

Why I went viral on Twitter after talking about being evicted on Sky News. Kirsty Archer. The Guardian: 16 April 2019

Tenants' union to protest against Edinburgh letting agent offering 'sham' holiday lets. Scottish Housing News: 16 May 2019.

Do you live in shoddy housing that costs a fortune? Time to join the renters' union. Dan Sabbagh. The Guardian: 3 Jun 2018.

ACORN – Ethical lettings campaign. People's Health Trust – Active Communities case study.