How the Tenant Voice Programme has amplified private renters' voices

Progress and impact report 2019-2022

Nationwide Foundation

October 2022

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About the Nationwide Foundation

As an independent charity, the Nationwide Foundation influences changes to improve circumstances for those people in the UK who most need help. Its vision is for everyone in the UK to have access to a decent home that they can afford, and the Decent Affordable Homes strategy seeks to improve the lives of people who are disadvantaged because of their housing circumstances. One key part of the Nationwide Foundation's strategy is the Transforming the Private Rented Sector programme. The Foundation has a commitment to transforming the private rented sector so that it provides homes for people in need that are more affordable, secure, accessible and better quality.
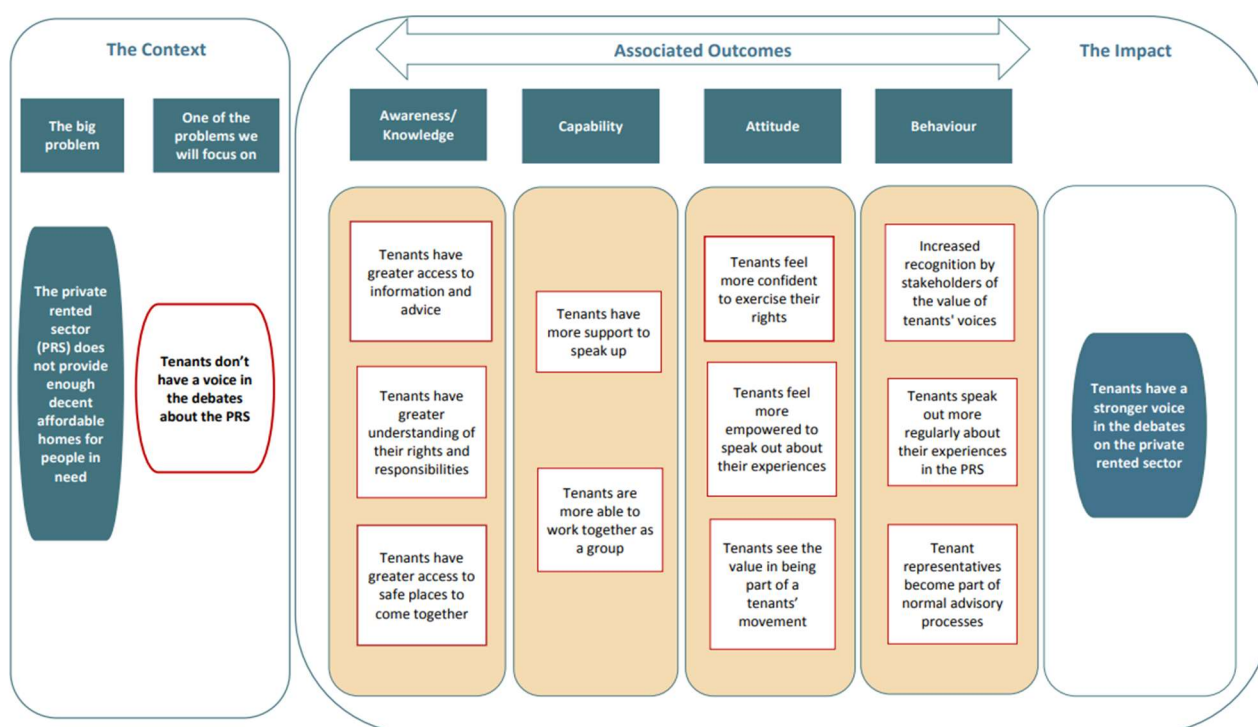
1. What is the Tenant Voice Programme?

One of the Nationwide Foundation's aims for the Transforming the Private Rented Sector programme is that tenants should be central to any changes to the private rented sector (PRS). To support this, the Foundation created the Tenant Voice Programme (TVP) which was designed to strengthen the collective voice of private tenants so that their voices could be used to influence debates on the PRS.

The Tenant Voice Programme funds a mixed portfolio of projects, which are trialling a range of models to strengthen tenant voice through influencing both policy and practice. This enables:

- The projects to develop and deliver their work well, delivering impact for tenants.

- The programme team and wider sector to draw on learnings about the strengths and challenges of different models in different contexts, and how these can be used to drive change in the PRS.

In particular, the Nationwide Foundation encourages projects to focus on tenants vulnerable to harm[1], a group whose voice is seldom heard or listened to.

Theory of change for the Tenant Voice Programme phase one (2019 – 2022):

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[1] Defining vulnerability is challenging in this context and is explored in a section of this report.

About this report

This report summarises the progress of the Tenant Voice Programme in phase one, highlighting what has been learnt around the enablers and barriers to strengthening tenant voice, and how this can influence debates on the PRS. Phase one of the TVP ran between mid-2019, when project funding began, and late 2022.

The insight in this report draws on findings that emerged from a review of the Tenant Voice Programme carried out by Renaisi. This included engaging with grant-holders via a survey, interviews, and a workshop in August 2022 to:

1. **Collectively reflect on the progress and learnings** from the TVP over the period 2019-2022 in line with the TVP phase one **theory of change.**

2. Probe those **assumptions** which have underpinned the theory of change in phase one and explore others which might be incorporated and tested going forward.

3. Understand more about **different models for strengthening tenant voice** - and how these can influence decisions at different levels and in different contexts.

- Explore TVP's **understanding of 'vulnerability'** and reflect on the ways in which the programme has supported cohorts vulnerable to harm.

We also drew on internal monitoring and learning information collected by the Nationwide Foundation to better understand the projects and their impact.

2. What were the different tenant voice models?

The Tenant Voice Programme (TVP) funded seven organisations. Funding began in 2019, which meant most delivery took place in the context of Covid-19.

While each funded project took a unique approach to strengthening tenant voice, there were broadly two types of funded project defined by the Nationwide Foundation:

1. **Community organising models (COMs):** Aim to engage and mobilise a large group of renters, supporting them to challenge their landlords in their personal housing situations and to collectively call for wider reform. COMs often have a membership function, meaning they are owned and directed by the renters they engage.

2. **Policy panel models (PPMs):** Tend to work with a smaller group of core tenants to influence and scrutinize policy by bringing them together to share their experiences, voice concerns and give evidence which the organisation can take to influential decision-makers. Tenants engage with the project after receiving housing support from a caseworker at the organisation. These models aim to bring tenant voice to those with influence over policy as part of their advocacy.

Community organising models

Grant-holders that took a community organising approach were:

Greater Manchester Tenants Union (GMTU)

The project aimed to bring together disadvantaged and low-income renters across Greater Manchester to develop a manifesto which would be used as a campaigning tool in the mayoral elections and feed into national influencing. As part of the project, Greater Manchester Tenants Union (GMTU) delivered renters' rights sessions through the pandemic and collaborative workshops to develop the manifesto, with up to 1,000 renters involved. Alongside this, GMTU was able to build a strong relationship with Andy Burnham, the mayor of Greater Manchester. It also built political leads across the Greater Manchester Combined Authority to win commitments from Andy Burnham, such as the union's involvement in co-producing the Good Landlords scheme.

Tenants Together – Living Rent

Tenants Together first started as an initiative to develop branches of the Scottish tenants' union in two neighbourhoods where renting issues were prevalent, focusing on low-income and migrant backgrounds. As a result of the work, tenants took part in national campaigning during Scottish elections and to seek an extension of the pandemic eviction ban. Their members contributed to Living Rent's organisational responses to the government's 'A New Deal for Tenants' consultation and branch officers also took part in a national forum to plan broader mobilisation of renters to engage with the consultation. Members also had a key role in in campaigning for the extension of the national eviction ban, sharing their experiences around evictions to call for better rights.

Tenants United – Shelter

Tenants United aims to organise tenants around PRS reform, building networks in the community and adding capacity to other renter groups in the area through funding a full-time community organiser. The organiser has upskilled a core team of ten renters who now have extensive knowledge on their rights and have designed a campaign strategy for their Bristol Fair Renting campaign. The renters have developed a manifesto for change which has been signed by 2,000 people online, co-hosted a mayoral assembly with ACORN Tenants' Union calling for reforms, and have featured on a community podcast about private renting issues.

What were the key successes and challenges of community organising models?

What worked well?

Organisations that take a community organising model often represent large numbers of tenants, which can allow them to also build pressure on leaders to call for policy reform through mobilising action across voters. Projects using a community organising model felt that the following worked especially well:

- Enable renters **to take responsibility for driving change** by establishing clear structures for them to engage in and influence organisational decision-making.

  *"Having structures which give people clear ways to have ownership…
  The overall coherence of the organisation made it successful."*

  *"Having actions, the tenants leading the team, getting out and about,
  chatting to other renters have been successes…"*

- Demonstrate the **value of tenant voice** to those tenants engaged and others in the community by celebrating quick wins at both the community and individual level.

  *"Visible acts of resistance are really important to people feeling like things
  can change."*

- Run local campaigns which resonate across a broad range of renters, **encouraging more renters to participate** in consultation and advocacy.

  *"Community campaigns are really important, having small victories in
  individual and neighbourhood levels."*

- Establish partnerships with other community organisations to engage with wider and more diverse groups, mobilising action across a broader range of people.

  *"Partnerships have been really important for building solidarity and
  reaching communities."*

What were the challenges?

In England, a **Section 21 notice**[2], (or 'no-fault possession notice') gives the right for landlords to repossess property without giving a reason. This policy was mentioned as a big challenge for projects, as they felt the threat of eviction was a key factor holding back large numbers of tenants from more actively and publicly campaigning for their rights.

> *"Section 21 is concentrated very highly in London, so they're an involuntarily mobile population, making community organising at a neighbourhood level very difficult."*

> *"If their landlord gets hint of the fact they may be an activist…*
> *we had to scrap our idea of solidarity posters for that very reason."*

Projects also felt it could be **challenging to build a diverse and representative group** for organising, as it often required intentional efforts to bridge across communities and build relationships. As a result of the need to engage large groups of renters, **Covid-19 posed a particular challenge** to this model, given that many grant-holders found it challenging to build relationships across a community and rally them for collective change online.

> *"Ensuring the team is representative all the way through is particularly difficult when people have to step away regularly…"*

> *"It requires a lot of time and energy to build community, doing it online can be difficult as the bonds aren't as resilient."*

Where are the opportunities?

Grant-holders felt that the Covid-19 pandemic and the cost-of-living crisis worsened the experiences of tenants; but also provided opportunities to motivate community organising and pressure politicians for policy change.

> *"The mood due to the cost-of-living crisis is that people need to stand up and do things, we need political change which only happens when politicians see the change as inevitable, so when we all agree on something that needs to change it's more likely to happen."*

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[2] Evicting tenants (England and Wales): Section 21 and Section 8 notices - GOV.UK (www.gov.uk)

Policy panel models

Projects which reflected a policy panel model were:

Renters' Voice - Housing Rights Northern Ireland

Renter's Voice created a panel to engage with tenants vulnerable to harm, build confidence and capacity, and support them to participate in and influence policy and practice debates. The panel met regularly, with 10 to 12 core tenants involved at any one time. Renters' Voice members gave evidence to the Committee for Communities on the Private Tenancies Bill, hosted a meeting with senior officials from the Department for Communities, launched a Notice to Quit campaign and participated in a range of focus groups. A notable point was when the group organised and held a Crunch Point for Private Renters event, increasing tenant engagement with the project and influencing decision-makers regarding Northern Ireland's emergency notice to quit legislation.

Z2K

Z2K is an organisation that aims to help homeless and vulnerably housed tenants to access accommodation in the PRS. They are one of the most locally focused organisations, with most of their clients coming from the borough of Westminster in London and the rest from surrounding boroughs. As a result of the project, a group of tenants submitted evidence to the Housing, Communities and Local Government Select Committee on the effectiveness of government measures for addressing the impact of the pandemic on the PRS. The project brought tenant voices into local campaigning and debate around the PRS in London.

PRS Research Panel – Citizens' Advice

This project initially began as a research panel, whereby Citizens' Advice surveyed and interviewed a demographically representative panel of 700 tenants across England quarterly. This was to collect qualitative and quantitative evidence on tenant experience to take to policy-makers. It has since developed a core panel of around nine highly engaged renters to influence in-depth policy development and co-produce policy demands. Citizens' Advice were able to host a roundtable with five panel members in March 2022 where members shared their own experiences and thoughts on private renting reform with the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC). Citizens' Advice also used information from the panel to inform campaign outputs and policy advocacy, including measures that were adopted by the government, such as the pandemic eviction ban and its extension.

What were the key successes and challenges of policy panel models?

What has worked well?

The policy panel approach can be **particularly effective for information and advice organisations** who are able to engage clients with whom they have established a trusted relationships; and for **those working with a smaller client base**, who might be unable to

mobilise large numbers of people via an organising approach. Grant-holders who took this approach felt that they were able to:

- Bring together groups representative of private renters with diverse PRS experiences to build their voice and speak to power.

    "Our success was in engaging renters who face the most barriers to participation (those who are vulnerable, disabled, living in poverty, etc) to be empowered."

- **Convene people quickly** to gather data around tenant experiences and perceptions to influence policy-makers and consult on the detail and implementation of policy.

    "We've been able to convene quickly and survey people on short notice when important issues crop up."

- Build and **sustain engagement with a core group of people to develop their confidence to** use their voice to co-produce policy demands and participate in advocacy.

    "Sustaining a core group to build their demands for change…"

- **Target decision-makers** responsible for policy change and pointing tenants in the direction of levers for change, particularly where organisations were operating in places with a **relatively centralised local authority system, and fewer key decision-makers** to influence.

    "Identifying the key individuals to target for policy change and showing tenants the route to access them."

What were the challenges?

A key challenge for this model was the slow progress of policy change. This can pose a risk to sustaining the engagement of the core group, who might struggle to stay motivated without seeing any tangible change or 'quick wins'.

"Changing policy takes a long time, it's hard to maintain engagement."

"Concerns around tenants' demands not leading to meaningful change, you have to manage expectations."

The pandemic also presented particular challenges to this model, as it absorbed political attention to the extent that it was very challenging to get traction with any other policy issues.

What were the opportunities?

Alongside the challenges it presented, the Covid-19 pandemic enabled a number of rapid policy changes, such as the eviction ban and its extension, which supported grant-holders to engage people in policy panels as they were able to directly point to areas for potential influence, with real-life, visible impacts.

"Covid has identified new groups to engage."

"The cost of living crisis is boosting engagement."

Mixed models

The line between a PPM and a COM sometimes blurred, with many grant holders drawing on multiple approaches to engage tenant voice. One grant-holder particularly displayed a mix of both models:

Renters' Rights London – Camden Federation of Private Tenants

Renters' Rights London (RRL) works with local authorities and tenants in Greater London to both put pressure on local authorities to focus more on supporting tenants' rights and build renters capacity to engage in local political processes. Funding supported them to deliver renters' rights training and facilitate spaces for renters to share their experiences for a number of community organisations across London. Alongside this, they successfully influenced Islington Council to commit to improving tenant conditions in their 2022 manifesto and delivered a three-month engagement and outreach project for Southwark Council, resulting in a report on the best way to set up a renter panel in the borough.

The learnings from this approach embed into the learnings for both models outlined in the above sections.

3. What were some of the key achievements?

Successes in influencing change

There were a number of key successes across the programme. As each project used a different approach and model, the outcomes and influence of each project were unique. However, some specific successes across the portfolio included:

- Delivering a private renters' manifesto written by renters, including the most marginalised renters.

- Delivering renters' rights sessions and facilitating groups to share experiences.

- Mobilising tenants to contribute to government-led public consultations around housing reform.

- Contributing to the government policy response to the pandemic, notably the eviction ban.

- Engaging tenants to plan and lead organising events.

- Bringing together data on tenant experience, supporting and empowering tenant representatives to provide evidence to policy-making committees.

- Bringing together panels of tenants to co-produce demands for a bill to end Section 21 evictions.

- Building relationships between tenants and key political stakeholders and civil servants.

- Producing media outputs such as podcasts, reports and articles informed and/or written by tenants within the projects.

- Securing commitments from local authorities to change PRS conditions in their areas.

Adapting to Covid-19

Aside from the project-specific achievements, it was felt that the success of the programme as a whole had resulted from grant-holders' ability to adapt, respond to, and take hold of the fast-changing landscape brought on by the Covid-19 pandemic. This context made possible some quick wins in influencing, demonstrating the value of tenant voice to tenant participants and wider stakeholders.

> *"I think we had great success in getting the project off the ground during Covid, we made a quick pivot to digital."*

> *"There was momentum for change caused by the pandemic which the project was able to take advantage of."*

A number of grant-holders noted that the need to rethink their engagement approach with increasing social distancing restrictions led them to be **more intentional in ensuring accessibility** to a wide range of tenants.

> *"Adopting an online approach helped to engage people across boroughs, we were better able to incorporate everyone working together in the outer parts of [the city]."*

However, organisations reflected that relying overly on online engagement could **exclude those with a lack of digital skills**, access to personal devices and confidence in the English language - who were often the tenants most vulnerable to harm. Grant-holders also agreed that it was often **harder to sustain engagement through online meetings**, even if it might initially allow for higher numbers to participate. One grant-holder emphasised that having a **mix of both online and in-person engagement mechanisms was crucial** to bring out the voices of a diverse range of tenants, and noted that it was essential to take a person-centred approach to adapt tools to the needs of individual tenants.

> *"You need a mix of online and in-person, our new in-person sessions has brought in new people that weren't there for our online sessions. There's a need for both."*

> *"Some renters are in crisis, you can't just bring someone in [to campaign], you need to support people to vent about their*

powerlessness and meet them where they're at. Like giving inductions for renters by renters."

"We enabled those with less digital skills to take part by giving them support."

Furthermore, both models found that the **unstable political landscape during Covid-19, with continual change in decision-makers and political priorities was also a barrier to their advocacy work,** as it made it challenging to build relationships with the decision-makers necessary to influence change.

4. Learning around change

The experiences of grant-holders throughout the project, and from their broader experience in the sector, has provided them with a wealth of knowledge on how to strengthen tenant voice and drive change in the private rental sector. Their insights have supported the Nationwide Foundation to build a greater understanding of the process of change in strengthening the voices of tenants in debates on the private rented sector (PRS).

Theory of change
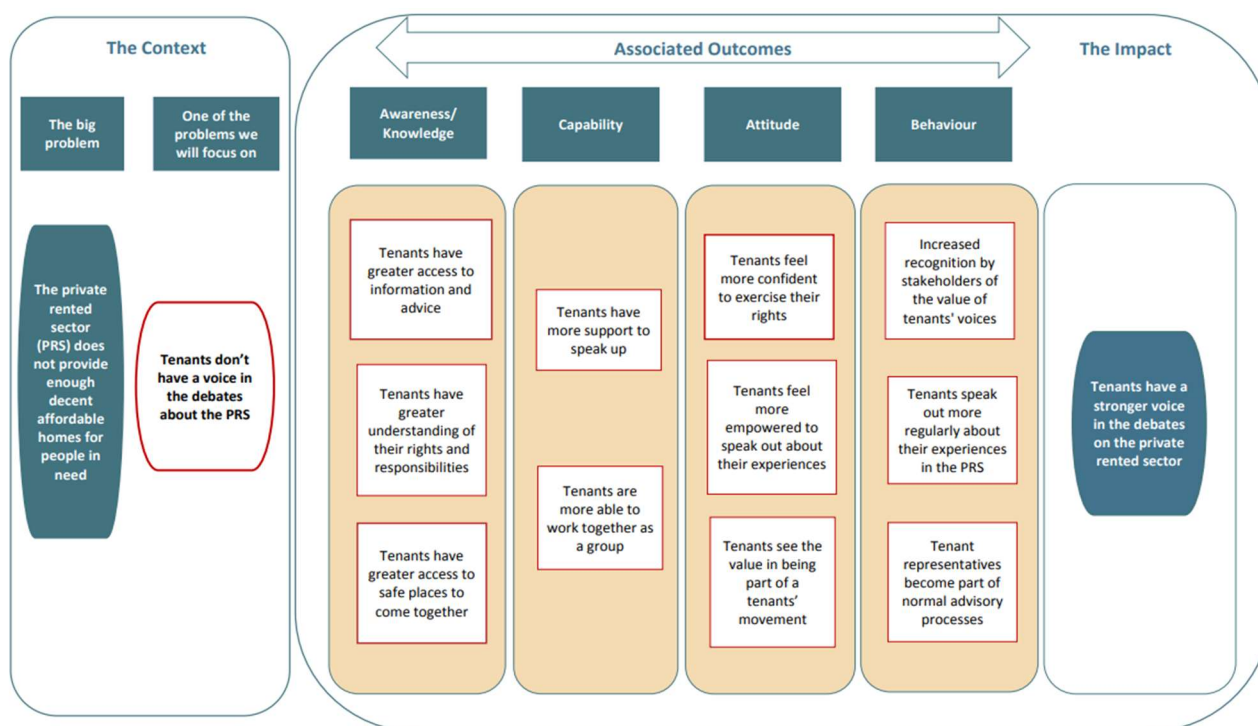
The following sections discuss learning regarding change around the four areas of outcomes in the theory of change:

- Awareness and knowledge
- Capability
- Attitude

- Behaviour

Building tenant awareness and knowledge

Grant-holders believe that **tenants having greater access to information and advice** will support the strengthening of their voice. However, they noted that this was likely to be a longer-term change, rather than having immediate impacts on PRS policy. Individual grant-holders found that **combining access to information and advice** with **organising approaches** that both support individual tenants to exercise their rights and encourage peer-to-peer support can translate into stronger tenant voice.

> *"Tenants end up acting as peer advisors in the community once you've given them that advice and support, it gets passed all around to those who haven't accessed the project."*

Supporting **tenants to develop a greater understanding of their rights and responsibilities** was also felt to be key to strengthening tenant voice, with grant-holders noting that this often served as the first step in encouraging participants to take part in higher-commitment activities, such as campaigning:

> *"Our Know Your Rights session were a key part of recruiting people who may get involved in a long-term way, like influencing or joining projects, it's a great way to get people in with no obligation for further commitment."*

However, a few grant-holders also noted that supporting tenants to understand their rights and responsibilities is not sufficient to transform their experience of the PRS, as their existing rights are limited. These grant-holder-holders felt that ultimately the aim should be to expand the rights of tenants.

> *"It's less about feeling competent to exercise those rights, because the point is, they don't really have them."*

Tenants having greater access to physical safe places to come together did not seem as critical to grant-holders in their projects to strengthen tenant voice. The experience of delivering projects during the pandemic meant that grant-holders were rarely able to bring tenants together physically, and a number of grant-holders noted that the most effective way to engage tenants was to go to where they felt most comfortable. Grant-holders believed the key outcome here was that tenants felt safe and comfortable to participate freely in discussions around the experience of renting and PRS policy.

> *"Usually we don't expect people to come to us, rather we encounter them at places they would usually be, we don't want to add the additional burden of them finding us."*

Tenant capabilities

The funded projects had all successfully given **tenants more support to speak up**. Grant-holders noted that they had seen tenants with whom they worked doing this by raising

issues with their landlords and giving evidence of their lived experience in debates on the PRS.

> *"Working closely with a core group of tenants it's been easy to track where change has happened, tenants who were previously shy go on a journey to be more capable of speaking up at a conference."*

However, grant-holders felt that the **phrasing around "speaking up"** as key to building tenant voice **was limiting** as it implies a need for tenants to orally speak in a public space, which might not be the ambition for every tenant.

> *"What do we mean by speaking up?... The definition should be inclusive of the variety of ways this could happen, for example doing research within their communities but not speaking out personally at a meeting."*

Grant-holders also questioned whether tenants should be given ongoing support to voice their concerns, or if a more effective approach would be to phase out support over time. In the context of limited capacity for one-to-one support, most grant-holders provide support to a range of people at different times, rather than providing ongoing support to an individual. The strengths and weaknesses of different approaches to support was identified as an area for further learning.

Tenants being more able to work together as a group was another outcome that many grant-holders felt was not sufficient to strengthen tenant voice in the PRS. Some felt that there was a hierarchical structure inherent in "good group working" which was inappropriate in their project, and that this must be defined or unpacked further. Most grant-holders had learnt that recruiting and developing tenant groups takes time and it can be very challenging to sustain consistent engagement. This meant that some were working with groups with changing or inconsistent attendance, which posed challenges for establishing group culture – although some noted it could still be effective in bringing to light the experiences and opinions of tenants.

It was also noted that in some projects, which aimed to bring together a group of tenants to speak to policy-makers, the groups were never intended to be sustainable without the input of the project. One grant-holder, who took this approach, noted that their organisation acted as a facilitator for the group to support them in navigating the complexities of policy-making and influencing. They noted that this meant that the group was unlikely to have the same impact independently, but this should not undermine the importance of the work in making the voice of tenants heard in policy spaces.

> *"How do you measure this? What does being 'more able' look like?"*

> *"How do you avoid creating gatekeepers and replicating a power structure?"*

Attitudes of tenants

Grantees believed that their projects supported tenants to **feel more confident in exercising their rights** and to **feel more empowered to speak out about their experiences**. Specifically, one grantee noted that bringing in representatives from relevant

local authority teams to speak to tenants could support this process by giving tenants confidence that their concerns would be dealt with in a way that did not put them at risk of eviction. Another noted that bringing tenants together empowered tenants by shifting a perception that landlords are the victims of 'bad tenants', supporting tenants to see their experiences as reflecting a broader systemic injustice, and building their demands for change.

> *"What we saw in the evolution of the group was a recognition…that they had been treated poorly."*

This was tempered with a concern that these shifts in attitudes would not always translate into tenant voice influencing change. Exploring how shifts in attitudes can ultimately lead to a stronger voice is an area for further learning, in particular to understand what scale of engagement is needed to drive influence and what factors in the external environment make conditions conducive to change.

> *"People are more confident around their rights, but the scale is not there yet… We need to clarify the scale that is needed for increase tenant confidence to translate to change."*

> *"Talking does not mean you are being listened to, the connection needs to be explored."*

Demonstrating how tenant organising can influence change at an individual and policy level can lead to an attitudinal shift whereby **tenants see the value in being part of a tenants' movement**. This was reflected by tenants who reported a sense of relief and solidarity in having opportunities to share their views, hearing from other tenants with similar experiences and feeling that their stories and experiences might reach key decision-makers. A few grantees also noted that it was critical that tenants see tangible changes to policy and practice to demonstrate the value of the tenant movement, whether this was at a policy level or for individual renters. Covid-19 was noted as demonstrating the value of policy changes in supporting movement-building, as changes such as the eviction ban and its extension demonstrated the power of collective tenant voice.

However, it was felt to be a challenge when 'quick wins' were not seen by engaged tenants, or the gains from organising are not felt on an individual level. Grantees also acknowledged that tenants can be fearful of the risks that organising and vocalising their experiences of the PRS may pose to their personal housing security: for example, while section 21 no-fault evictions are still in place in England.

> *"The feedback we got from people…was they've really appreciated the opportunity to share their experiences, because malpractice and renting is wildly underreported, because in most people don't seek any redress."*

Changes in behaviour

Increased recognition by stakeholders of the value of tenants' voices was identified as critical to change and was an aim of all the funded organisations. One grantee in particular noted that influencing policy-makers to engage with and listen to tenant voice

was key to ensuring that the detail of policies reflected experience on the ground. The Nationwide Foundation's funding of the Renters' Reform Coalition was noted by a few grantees as progressing this outcome by providing an avenue for smaller community-based organisations to platform the voices of the tenants with influential decision-makers. Within this, grantees had seen stakeholders begin to see the value of tenants' voice by actively seeking it out as part of their policy-making, although they noted that many considered the views of other stakeholders, such as landlords and developers, as more important. Grant-holders reported that the process of building relationships and shifting behaviour in stakeholders takes time, particularly with local authorities where decision-making processes are lengthy and long embedded.

"There's a risk of fairly well-intentioned policy-makers messing it up, if they don't understand how that looks and feels on the ground."

"There needs to be more formal commitments to housing rights. There's a need to formalise this 'recognition', to move beyond dialogue to structures."

Grant-holders stressed the importance of distinguishing between individual and collective voice to understand the type of change that might emerge. It was also felt that collective voice approaches might end up benefiting the 'average' person, while overlooking the needs of the most vulnerable to harm (more on vulnerability below).

Grant-holders also believed that while **tenants speaking out more regularly about their experiences of the PRS** was a positive outcome, it can also lead to apathy, when it does not translate to meaningful individual and structural change.

"Circular policy processes – these were described as a 'waiting room' by a member to me."

"I'd suggest a modification to the outcome: 'tenants needs are prioritised in discussions about the PRS.'"

While most grant-holders felt that their projects had supported **tenants to become part of advisory processes**, they were reluctant to say that tenants were a part of 'normal' advisory processes. Some emphasised that tenants were represented in certain or specific processes but that this was not yet normalised, and others noted that they had embedded tenant representation into advisory processes but did not have the audience of key decision-makers which could enable the representation to lead to change.

"There is a concern around 'death by consultation'."

"'Normal' advisory processes are not there, these need to be established."

"Suggested modification to that outcome: 'Accessible, meaningful and appropriate advisory processes'."

A few grant-holders noted that there had been increased willingness from civil servants at national and local authority level to engage with them and embed tenant voice into their

decision-making, which they hoped would lead to better policy implementation and reform. They noted that increased recognition of the value of tenant voice led in turn to it becoming a more regular part of decision-making.

"I think the reason that they [decision makers] were so keen to speak to our panel was they'd already spoken to other panels and they found it really useful."

Testing our assumptions

The theory of change is based on assumptions about how tenant voice can influence change. Testing and refining these assumptions with the experiences of grantees has helped the Nationwide Foundation to more accurately understand the process of change and how to support it. This section discussed three key assumptions that were unpacked with grant-holders:

1. If tenants have a stronger voice at a local level, this will lead to change at the local, regional and national level.

2. Achieving a stronger voice for tenants will lead to reform and benefit all tenants – including the most vulnerable.

3. If more tenants successfully challenge their landlords or letting agent in their personal housing situations, this will contribute to improving PRS practice on the ground.

If tenants have a stronger voice at a local level, will this lead to change at the local, regional and national levels?

The experience of grant-holders demonstrated that while local-level voice could be a force for change at an individual and local level, it does not translate into broader change unless it is mobilised effectively to speak to power and thus influence policy. Those that took an organising approach believed that building a stronger voice at a local level was a key first step towards achieving change, but could not be the only tool. One grant-holder noted that for stronger tenant voice to drive change at a local level, it must be directed at local-level political decision-makers, who can advocate for policy and practice change at a national level if they think it will ensure the support of their local voter base.

"Collective power equals a stronger voice and you can mobilise that in a political arena. Through campaigning, direct action etc, you can certainly achieve change."

"Having a voice doesn't necessarily equate to change, maybe it's having power as well as voice."

"You have to apply that political pressure at local level and then push for those MPs to make demands… it's only politics that changes things and politics ultimately is about votes."

A few grant-holders also noted that drawing attention to the experiences and perspectives of tenants makes it harder for policy-makers to block change at all levels. A grant-holder highlighted that the influence of the Renters' Reform Coalition in putting pressure on political decision-makers to push forward an end to Section 21 evictions provided evidence that building collective voice can lead to national-level change. While a bill has not yet been delivered, the Renters' Reform Coalition was able to attract the attention of policy-makers and take the voices of tenants to engage on this issue in an attempt to influence national-level change.

Grant-holders believed that this assumption needed to be adapted to define what voice meant in this context, as it must go beyond simply vocalising concerns if it would lead to change.

*"Voice is only one part of it. You need **hope, commitment, strategy and action** to build power."*

It was also suggested that this assumption should be adapted to make it clear that tenant voice must have political influence to drive change. The revision suggested was:

*"If tenants have a stronger voice **within political dialogue,** that leads to policy and practice changes."*

Will achieving a stronger voice for tenants lead to reform and benefit all tenants – including the most vulnerable?

Grant-holders believed that engaging the voice of tenants in policy debates will improve the degree to which policy and practice supports tenants' rights in the PRS. Without including tenant voice both in shaping the detail of policies themselves and in their implementation, policy-makers will fail to account for the power imbalance experienced by renters and its role in preventing renters from realising their rights.

However, grant-holders believed that reform does not always benefit the most vulnerable. The tenants most vulnerable to harm can face barriers which result in a unique experience in the PRS, with a greater power imbalance and higher risks. As such, where policy reform is informed by tenant voice that reflects the collective experience of the 'average tenant', the experiences and needs of the most vulnerable can be overlooked. Getting the detail of a bill right for all requires an explicit focus on listening to the voices of the most vulnerable and supporting them to scrutinise how that policy will affect them.

"We need to acknowledge that the change needed by one group may be different to the experience of another and reform may not impact all in the same way."

"It's really important that we…understand the experiences of vulnerable renters, the worst thing would be if we ended up replicating the errors that might be made by policy-makers by forgetting the mix of experience."

On the other hand, a few grant-holders also noted the importance of demonstrating the wider impact of a policy when advocating for change, rather than just leaning on the experiences of a few who are experiencing its effects most severely. There is a need to balance the desire to make the voices of the most vulnerable heard in policy discussion while ensuring that this does not overshadow the reality that a much broader proportion of the population is also potentially at risk from the systemic issues and power imbalance in the PRS. A grant-holder noted the need to platform the voices of different groups at different stages of driving change by appealing to the experiences of the majority of tenants when calling for big picture reforms and bringing in the experiences of distinct groups when influencing the detail of reform and implementation.

"If you just illustrate a problem through the most extreme experiences, then you are less likely to achieve change than if you demonstrate it as having a wider impact."

"What often sits in tension is the difference between making a broad campaigning argument for the bill, and policy-makers engaged in the detail of what will actually make the bill successful."

If more tenants successfully challenge their landlords or letting agent in their personal housing situations, will this contribute to improving PRS practice on the ground?

Grant-holders agreed that the victories of individuals are important and a few had stories of cases raised by individuals which had led to long-term changes in their local areas. Tenant challenges can support policy-makers to understand the experiences of renters and how policy is implemented on the ground.

"There's a benefit to individual wins, and hopefully there's a process of education for the landlord or agent."

That said, it is worth noting that challenges made to individual landlords were seen as less impactful than those to letting agents or landlords with many properties, as challenges to those with larger portfolios had the potential to lead to changes in practice which would impact a larger group of people.

Grant-holders also questioned the need for a challenge to be 'successful' to contribute to change. Many argued that if the system is unjust, challenges can fail to achieve all that they raise while still having an impact on practice and attitudes.

"Even if you challenge your landlord and it's not successful, that story of why it wasn't successful can be really helpful in showing why the current redress systems don't work as well as policy-makers might think."

Another grant-holder, who has a focus on supporting tenants with casework, noted that this can sometimes bring them into conflict with politicians whom they are aiming to influence through policy advocacy. They highlighted a need to balance individual advocacy with careful navigation of the relationships needed to influence change.

A few grant-holders also questioned whether individual challenges should be a focus, suggesting collective challenges were likely to be more successful in driving change.

"Rather than individualistic wins for people, if you build a campaign where many challenge these issues – that's where you can make some change."

5. Supporting tenants vulnerable to harm in the PRS

Understanding vulnerability

Grant-holders were invited to review definitions of vulnerability and to explore how different vulnerable audiences were served by the programme.

The Nationwide Foundation has defined renters vulnerable to harm as:

"Those people whose personal characteristics and circumstances mean that they cannot avoid the potential problems of living in the private rented sector (insecurity, poor living conditions, high costs and severe lack of choice) which puts them at increased risk of harm. This harm can include poverty, homelessness, poor educational attainment, poor physical and mental health and dangerous, unsafe living conditions."

Overall, grant-holders felt that maintaining a broad and non-prescriptive definition of tenant vulnerability matched their experiences on the ground, with most recognising that different people will experience vulnerability at different times, rather than defining it by a set of characteristics.

A few grant-holders did not feel that the term "vulnerable" was appropriate, due to negative connotations and a feeling that the label could disempower people, possibly preventing them from taking steps to improve their situation.

"Vulnerable can make people sound less capable or less able to have self-actualisation. Other words could be marginalised, excluded or disempowered."

Participants generally agreed that vulnerability in the PRS, and the types of harm it can result in, is caused by or exacerbated by poverty and/or shocks to income, which can be experienced by a wide range of people and change over time. The link between poverty, mental health and vulnerability in the PRS was also mentioned as key to the concept.

Poverty was also seen as the driving factor behind most risk factors that can lead to tenants being vulnerable to harm and facing particular barriers to participation. There was a general agreement that people on low incomes and/or in poverty were shamed into a disempowered position, making them less likely to take part in campaigning or advocating for themselves.

"If you gave these people a large chunk of money, that would remove them from the risk in almost all circumstances."

"The barrier is how society makes people feel about poverty, how it affects one's sense of self."

Engaging renters who are vulnerable to harm

Grant-holders agreed that targeting those renters most vulnerable to harm required long-term projects which were embedded within the communities they were trying to reach.

"Long term approach, you need a reputation and community links to reach the most vulnerable. You need to build trust."

"In-person activities make a massive difference, along with a long-term presence and community."

Most felt that providing flexible avenues to engage people in the way most comfortable for them was essential to engage those most vulnerable to harm in their projects. Examples of different engagement tools used by grant-holders included closed Facebook groups for discussions, having meetings at different times of day to suit people's needs, using online surveys to find out how people would like to engage, and using a mix of online and offline platforms to suit people's needs and digital skill levels. Grant-holders highlighted the need to be attentive to the barriers that online engagement can pose, both to those with less access to digital devices and those with language barriers. Many reported that in-person outreach was often most effective for initial engagement with those renters who were most vulnerable to harm and that flexibility with engagement tools was key to maintaining it.

"Finding a variety of ways for people to participate, some people only want to engage in a survey and not come along to the group, others want to come to a group and be practical."

Grant-holders noted that active listening and transparency were also critical to show that people's views are valued and acted upon in order to build trust with groups that have experience of discrimination and exclusion from the system. Partnering with community networks was noted as a useful way for some grant-holders to better understand the needs and attitudes of different groups, particularly those with strong ties to a community whose first language is not English.

When asked about what they hoped to do more of to help those renters who are most vulnerable to harm to overcome barriers to participation, grant-holders stressed a need to meet people 'where they are' and not assume a "one size fits all" method. A number of grant-holders had found that this group of renters often come to projects just for support and information, without wanting to be involved in campaigning. They reported that the trauma that some of those renters most vulnerable to harm had experienced in their housing situation meant that many were very wary of speaking out publicly and engaging with authorities. It was felt these tenants should be provided with safe spaces to share their experiences without feeling that it would go any further. For example, a few grant-holders found that an effective and important way to empower the voice of the most vulnerable-to-harm renters was creating the option for their staff to share the experiences of those renters anonymously in policy spaces.
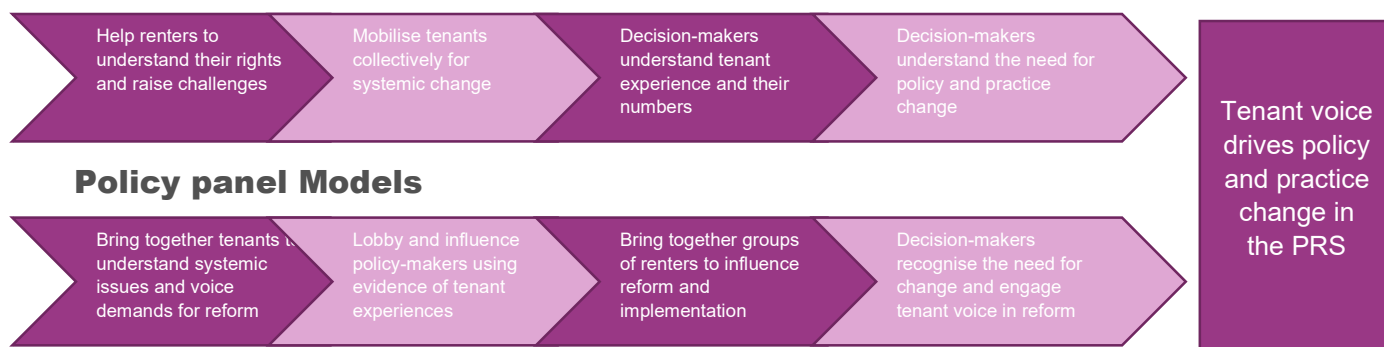
6. Recommendations and looking to the future…

Through funding a range of different models, the Tenant Voice Programme has been able to give organisations space to test different approaches to strengthening tenant voice; explore how this can drive change; and empower individual tenants to improve their housing situation.

The experiences of grant-holders show that funding different models is critical to engage different groups of people, gain influence with different audiences and, often, to lead to different demands. Bringing the models together in the TVP and Renters' Reform Coalition has demonstrated their value as an ecosystem, where all have different roles in their ambition to transform the PRS.

When these all speak in one voice as a sector it can make a significant impact, but that should not translate into seeking a consensus at the expense of the distinct messages of each organization who might represent the needs of different groups. The community organising model can mobilize large numbers of people around radical change to improve their circumstances and put pressure on leaders to listen. The policy panel model complements this by targeting influential decision-makers to lobby and incentivise them to advocate for policy reform, while bringing in tenant voice to ensure that the reform is a reflective of their needs. Continuing to strengthen and explore the strengths of both models, and how they can complement each other to transform the PRS, will be critical to build on the successes of the TVP.

Community Organising Models

Help renters to understand their rights and raise challenges	Mobilise tenants collectively for systemic change	Decision-makers understand tenant experience and their numbers	Decision-makers understand the need for policy and practice change

Policy panel Models

Bring together tenants to understand systemic issues and voice demands for reform	Lobby and influence policy-makers using evidence of tenant experiences	Bring together groups of renters to influence reform and implementation	Decision-makers recognise the need for change and engage tenant voice in reform

Tenant voice drives policy and practice change in the PRS

Next steps for the Tenant Voice Programme

The Nationwide Foundation will build on what has been achieved by the tenant voice programme so far, incorporating learnings on how change is achieved to develop an updated theory of change for phase two of the Tenant Voice Programme (TVP2). TVP2 will run for two years from the beginning of 2023 until the end of 2024. The Foundation wants to see tenants continuing to have a stronger voice which successfully influences for PRS policy and practice changes which benefit all tenants.

Recommendations and learning from phase one of the TVP

Supporting tenants to have a stronger voice in personal, local, regional and national decision-making:

- Building tenants' understanding of their individual rights can be a first step in developing their confidence to campaign for an expansion of these rights.
- Policy-making can appear complex and inaccessible. Facilitation is needed to support tenant groups to understand how they can influence policy-making.
- Supporting tenants to see their individual experiences as reflecting broader systemic injustice is a key to mobilising renters to become advocates for change.
- Highlighting that the volume of renters makes them a significant voting bloc can be an effective way to incentivise local-level political decision-makers to advocate for reform.
- Ensuring that policy-makers hear the voice of tenants is critical to ensure that the detail of policies and their implementation reflect real experiences and power imbalances that renters experience.

Supporting the participation of tenants vulnerable to harm:

- When vulnerability is experienced by a particular marginalised community, long-term projects that work with local community groups and leaders are key to building trust.
- Transparency around how the concerns voiced by tenants around their experience in the PRS will be progressed to action is critical for organisations aiming to build trust with groups that have experience of discrimination and exclusion from the system.
- Recognise that different renters will experience vulnerability at different times, rather than aiming to define who will be vulnerable by a set of characteristics.
- Acknowledge that renters vulnerable to harm might not feel comfortable speaking out publicly and engaging with authorities. Create safe spaces for tenants to share their experiences and speak anonymously. Sometimes it is more appropriate for project staff to share the stories of these tenants and advocate for reforms that will benefit them.
- Listening to and platforming the voices of the most vulnerable is key to ensuring that reform will account for the unique challenges they face in the PRS and to improving their position.

Building tenant skills, knowledge, leadership and advocacy:

- Combining provision of information and advice with support for tenants to exercise their rights and increasing their advocacy skills can build their voice and capacity.
- Bringing tenants together with local authority teams can build their confidence to raise concerns and understanding of change.
- Supporting individual tenants to challenge their letting agents or landlords with a large number of properties can lead to changes in practice which affect a broader group of people.

Building sustainable tenant voice and participation:

- Take a person-centred approach by adapting online and in-person tools to the needs of different tenants and engaging with tenants where they will feel most comfortable.
- Encouraging peer-to-peer support in collective organising approaches can build a self-sustaining model for tenant voice.
- Allow plenty of time to recruit and develop a representative tenant group as building relationships, commitment, trust and confidence across a group is key to supporting them to engage with policy reforms.
- Highlighting tangible changes and individual or small wins achieved by tenant movements is crucial to support sustained engagement where structural change is slow.
- Sustaining consistent engagement in tenant groups is challenging. Ongoing outreach to new tenants is vital to ensuring that the group can continue despite turnover in membership.

About Renaisi

We're passionate about creating the conditions for strong, inclusive communities to thrive.

We're constantly learning from the different perspectives we see working directly with communities, with the providers of services and the investors in communities. It gives us a unique perspective on how systems work and how to improve places equitably.

The combination of our research and evaluation consultancy with employment & advice programme delivery, makes Renaisi a uniquely well-rounded learning partner for the voluntary and community sector.