



Department for Levelling Up,
Housing & Communities

KANTAR PUBLIC

Social Housing Quality Resident Panel – Access to Information Scheme

Panel Member Report – Wave 1 Focus Groups

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Introduction and summary of findings

Background to the Social Housing Quality Resident Panel

The Social Housing Quality programme seeks to make long-lasting change to the social housing sector and improve the lives of social housing residents in England.

The Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC) have established the Social Housing Quality Resident Panel. This panel brings together around 250 social housing residents from across England to share their views with the Government and ministers on improving the quality of social housing.

Government is committed to listening to social housing residents, making sure residents have their voices heard, with policy makers reflecting and acting on what they hear. Kantar Public are running three waves of engagement with members of the Social Housing Quality Resident Panel. Each wave of engagement involves an online community and a series of focus group workshops.

Background to the focus group workshops

This report summarises the findings of the first wave of focus group workshops that took place in February 2023.

These workshops examined the views of panel members on the proposed Access to Information Scheme that DLUHC is developing.

The topics discussed during the focus groups were:

- panel members' experiences of asking for information from housing providers
- what panel members think of the scheme overall
- whether panel members think they would use the scheme
- what information panel members would request as part of the scheme
- what panel members like or do not like about the scheme and any potential barriers that may arise

Overview of the Access to Information Scheme

The Grenfell Tower Tragedy in June 2017 raised serious concerns about how some social housing residents were being treated by their housing providers. Residents had raised concerns and were not heard. Following this, the Charter for Social

Housing Residents committed to making providers more transparent. The Access to Information Scheme is one of the proposed changes the Government is introducing.

This Access to Information Scheme intends to ensure residents can access the information they need and hold their housing provider to account. This scheme will be applicable to residents of social housing managed by private registered providers (such as housing associations or Almshouses).

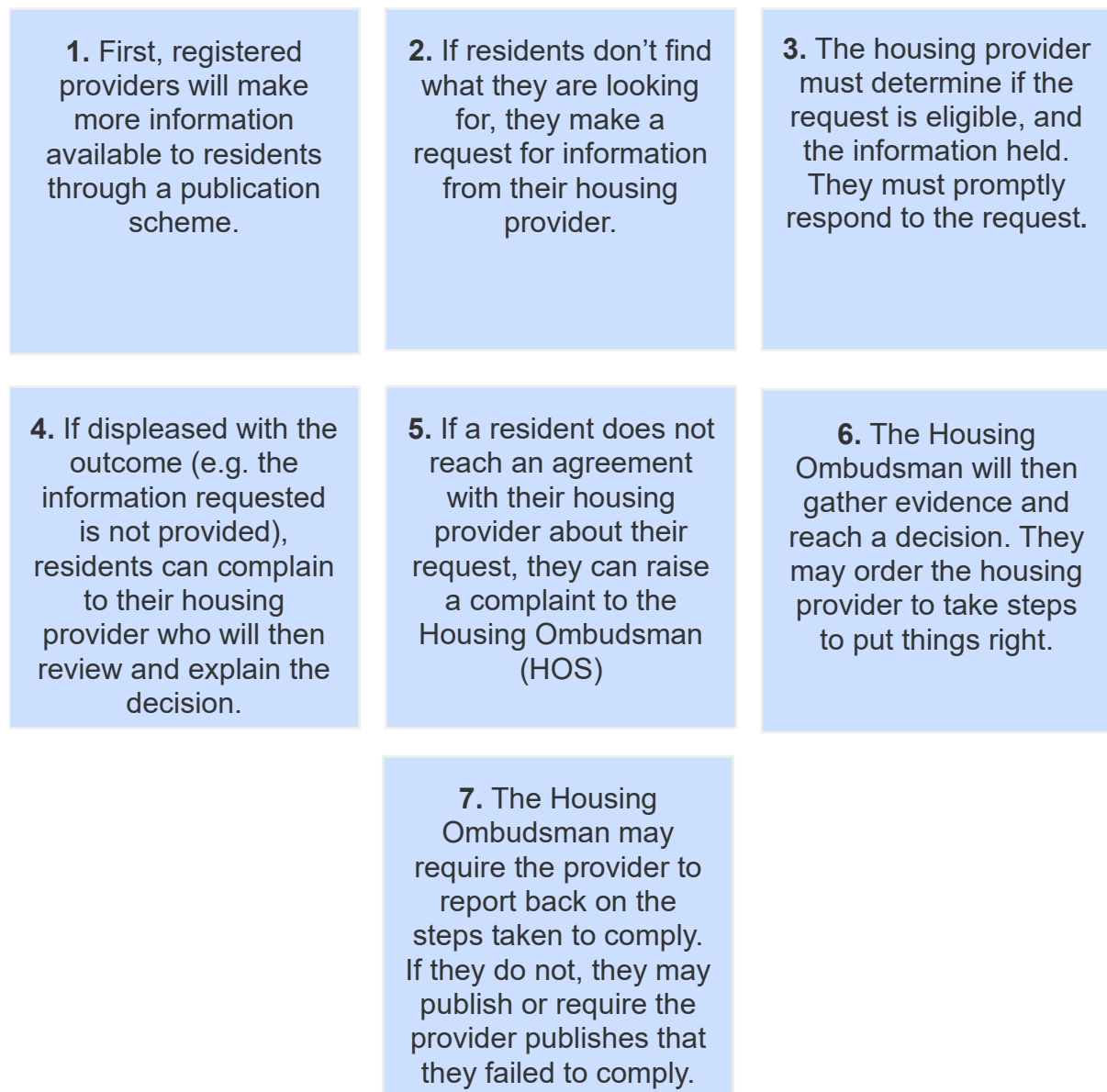
This Access to Information Scheme will give residents the ability to request information from their housing provider about the management of their social housing. For example, this might be information about maintenance work, the organisational structure of their housing provider or inspection results.

The Access to Information Scheme will also cover information held by a contractor or connected body who helps housing providers manage social housing.

The Access to Information Scheme will bring the ability of those living in housing provided by private registered providers to access information in line with local authority residents. Local authority residents can access information through the Freedom of Information Act. The Freedom of Information Act does not cover those living in housing provided by private registered providers, as they are not public bodies.

Figure 1 shows how the Access to Information Scheme will work in practice. Residents of private registered providers will be able to take a complaint to the Housing Ombudsman. They will be able to complain if they are unhappy with the outcome of their request for information from their housing provider.

Figure 1: Overview of the Access to Information Scheme



Under the Access to Information Scheme proposals, providers may refuse requests for certain reasons, such as if the query does not relate to social housing or the identity of the applicant is unclear.

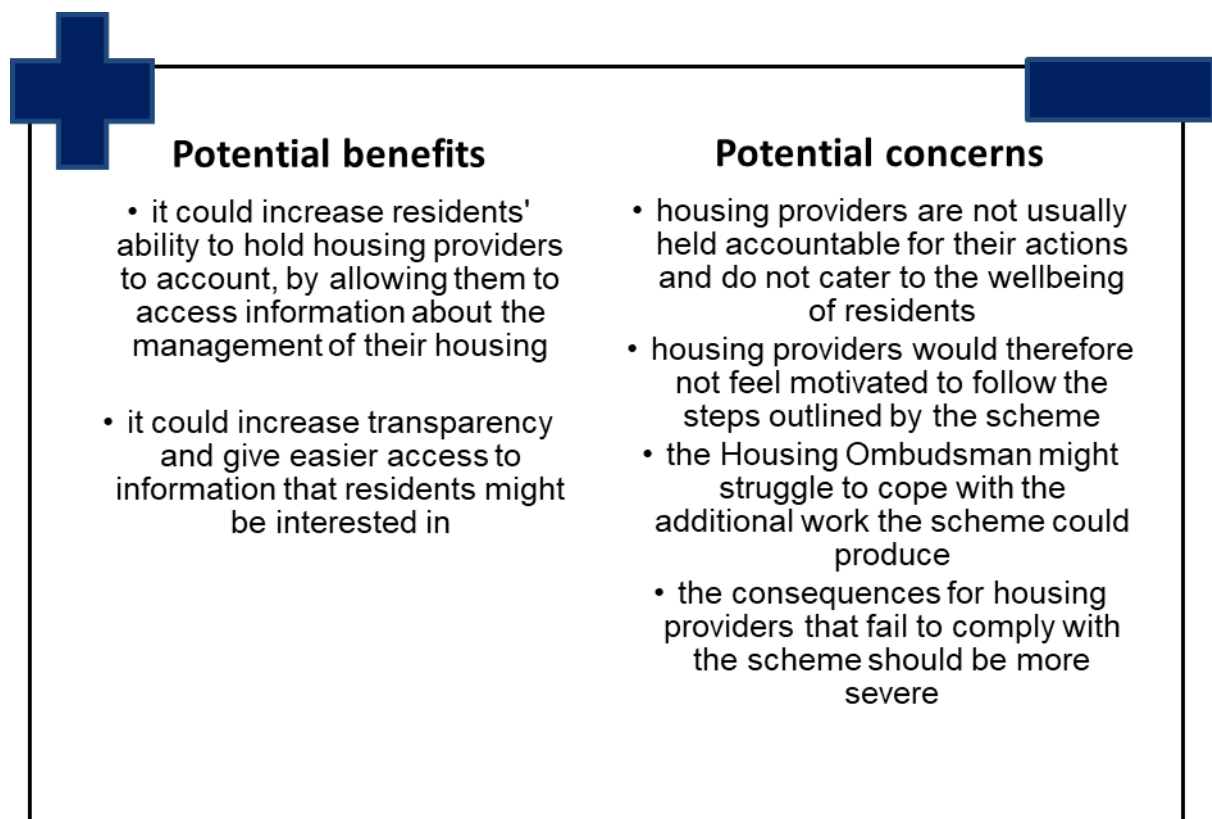
Summary of findings

When thinking about any previous experiences of asking for information from housing providers about the management of their social housing, panel members shared mixed experiences. Some had requested information, while others had not. Some information had been provided quickly to residents, while others chased housing providers over many months and had escalated their requests via several routes including contacting DLUHC, the Housing Ombudsman and MPs.

When discussing the Access to Information Scheme, panel members were positive about having a scheme that would formally give social housing residents of private registered providers the ability to request information from housing providers. This is because they felt information about the management of their social housing was something they should have access to.

However, panel members also raised concerns about the implementation of the Access to Information Scheme; their views are summarised in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Opportunities and concerns raised about the Access to Information Scheme



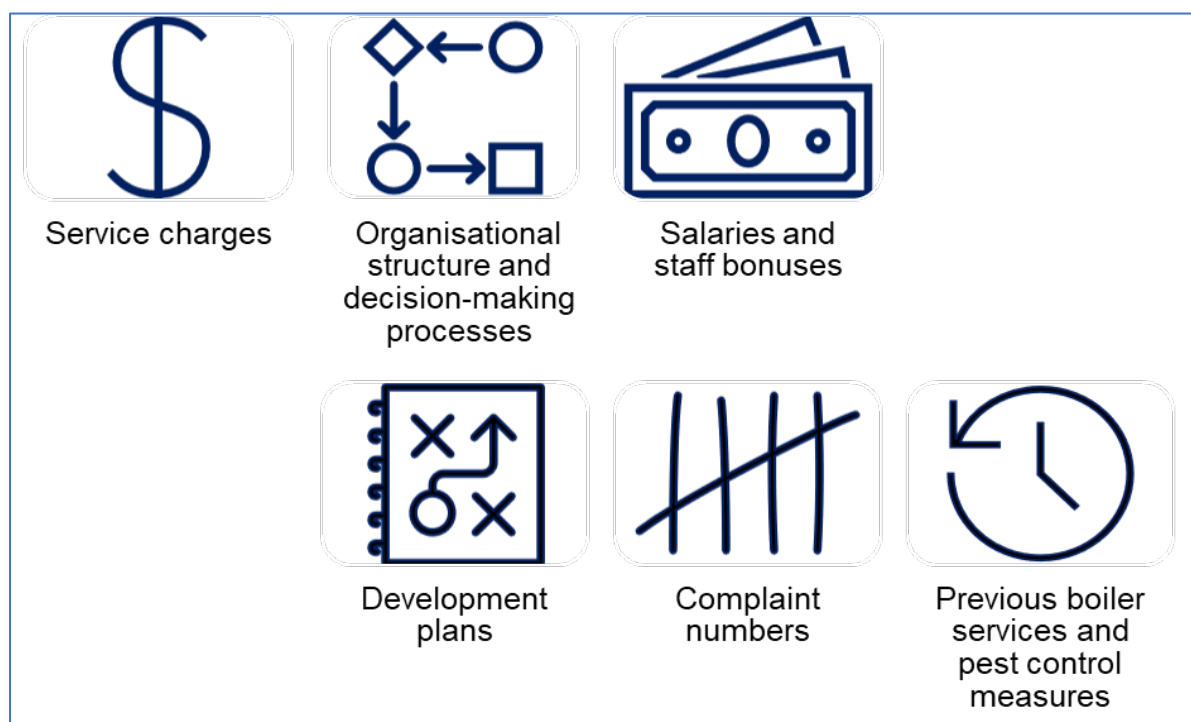
Experiences of asking for information

At the beginning of the focus groups, panel members were asked if they had ever requested information from their housing provider about the management of their social housing.

Experiences of asking for information

Panel members had mixed experiences about asking for information from their housing provider about the management of their social housing. Some had requested information, while others had not. Figure 3 summarises the types of requests made by panel members to their housing provider.

Figure 3: Requests for information made by panel members to their housing provider



Panel members had varied success gaining information when they made a request to their housing provider. Some information was provided quickly to residents, while others had to chase housing providers over several months. Some residents had also contacted DLUHC and their MP to get the requested information.

Some panel members had not requested information. This was because they:

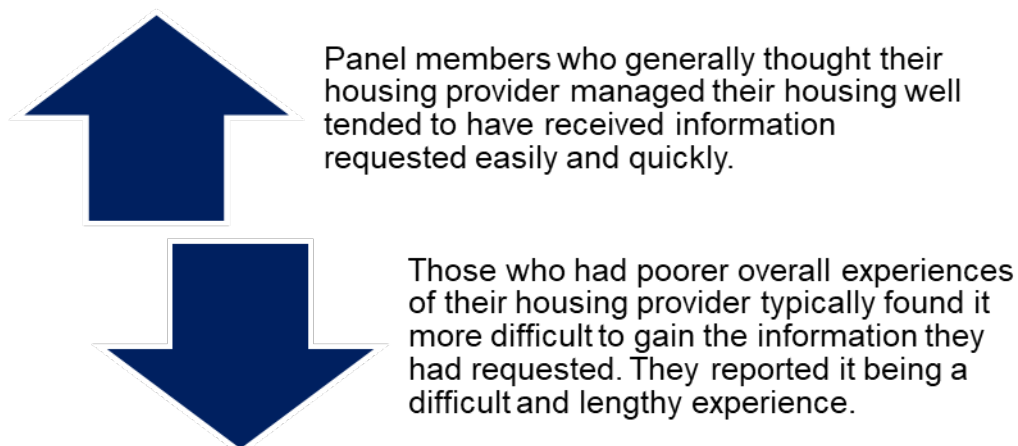
- were happy with the management of their homes
- found all the information they wanted on their housing provider's website
- had accessed the relevant information informally through Neighbourhood Officers or via resident panels
- did not think their provider would supply it
- felt it would be a difficult experience

Many panel members felt they were potentially more proactive and engaged in improving housing quality than other social housing residents. For example, many panel members were also members of resident scrutiny panels. They also stated that being members of local resident panels allowed them to have better contacts with their housing provider staff. Therefore, they believed they were more likely to ask for information from housing providers and be successful on average than other social housing residents.

Overall experiences of housing providers and experiences of accessing information

This ability to access information was often linked to panel members' overall experiences with their housing provider.

Figure 4: Experiences of accessing information



Many of the panel members that had poor experiences of their housing provider expressed the view that housing providers cared less about the welfare of residents. They believed housing providers were instead more concerned about protecting their organisation's own interests.

As a result, these panel members felt housing providers were unlikely to go out of their way to provide information to residents. Some felt providers might be motivated to provide incorrect information or withhold information if it was deemed beneficial to the organisation.

"I've had quite a good experience [requesting information]. There's not something I've found negative at this point."

Female, 55 to 64, South West



"Generally, my experience of getting information is poor and they [my housing provider] treat their tenants with contempt."

Male, 55 to 64, London

Views of the Access to Information Scheme

The focus groups explored the Access to Information Scheme in detail. Discussions revolved around four key areas:

1. Overall views of the Access to Information Scheme, any key benefits and drawbacks
2. The stage of the Access to Information Scheme where a resident requests information from their housing provider and the provider responds
3. The stage of the Access to Information Scheme where a resident could escalate a request to the Housing Ombudsman if they are unsatisfied with how their housing provider has responded to their request
4. Overall improvements that could be made to the Access to Information Scheme, as well as how panel members would like to be communicated to about the Access to Information Scheme and supported to use it

Several features of the scheme were discussed; however, it was not possible to cover all features in the time available.

Overview

Panel members welcomed the idea of having a scheme that would formally give social housing residents the ability to request information from housing providers.

They believed information about the management of their social housing was something they should have access to. They also felt this would give residents a greater ability to hold their housing providers to account. They liked that DLUHC is working on improving residents' experiences and felt the Access to Information Scheme was a step in the right direction.

However, Panel members raised concerns about the reality of implementing the scheme. Many panel members felt housing providers were unlikely to adhere to the steps and timelines outlined. Many were also concerned that housing providers would not be held accountable if they failed to comply.

These concerns were due to poor experiences of housing providers. Many panel members shared poor experiences of property maintenance. They also described

complaints that were not dealt with adequately and instances where they felt housing providers were not being held to account.

Panel members were also concerned about the Housing Ombudsman's ability to cope with the additional work the scheme could produce. This concern was driven by experiences of escalating complaints to the Housing Ombudsman but experiencing slow responses.

"I think it will be [positive] as long as the system has the force to make it happen."

Male, 65+, North East



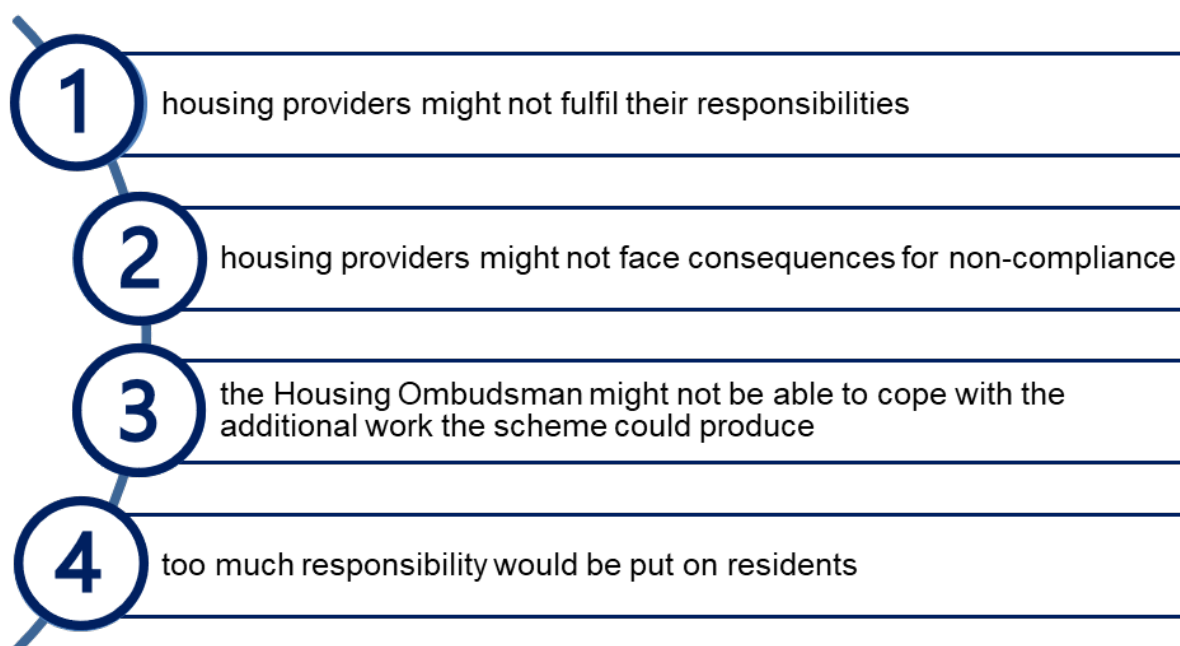
You going to have organisations like X going out of their way to pick holes in any new arrangement so they can continue to not provide information which any respectable organisation would be happy to provide."

Male, 55 to 64, London



Similarly, many panel members felt the Access to Information Scheme would be difficult for residents. It puts the burden on residents to put forward complaints about housing providers. They instead believed the focus should be on encouraging housing providers to provide information.

Figure 5: Summary of panel members' concerns about the Access to Information Scheme



Several panel members thought the Freedom of Information Act applied to those living in housing associations and questioned why the Access to Information Scheme was needed.

Some panel members did not know that the Freedom of Information Act only applies to local authority landlords. The purpose of the Access to Information Scheme and how it is distinct from the Freedom of Information Act was less clear to these panel members.

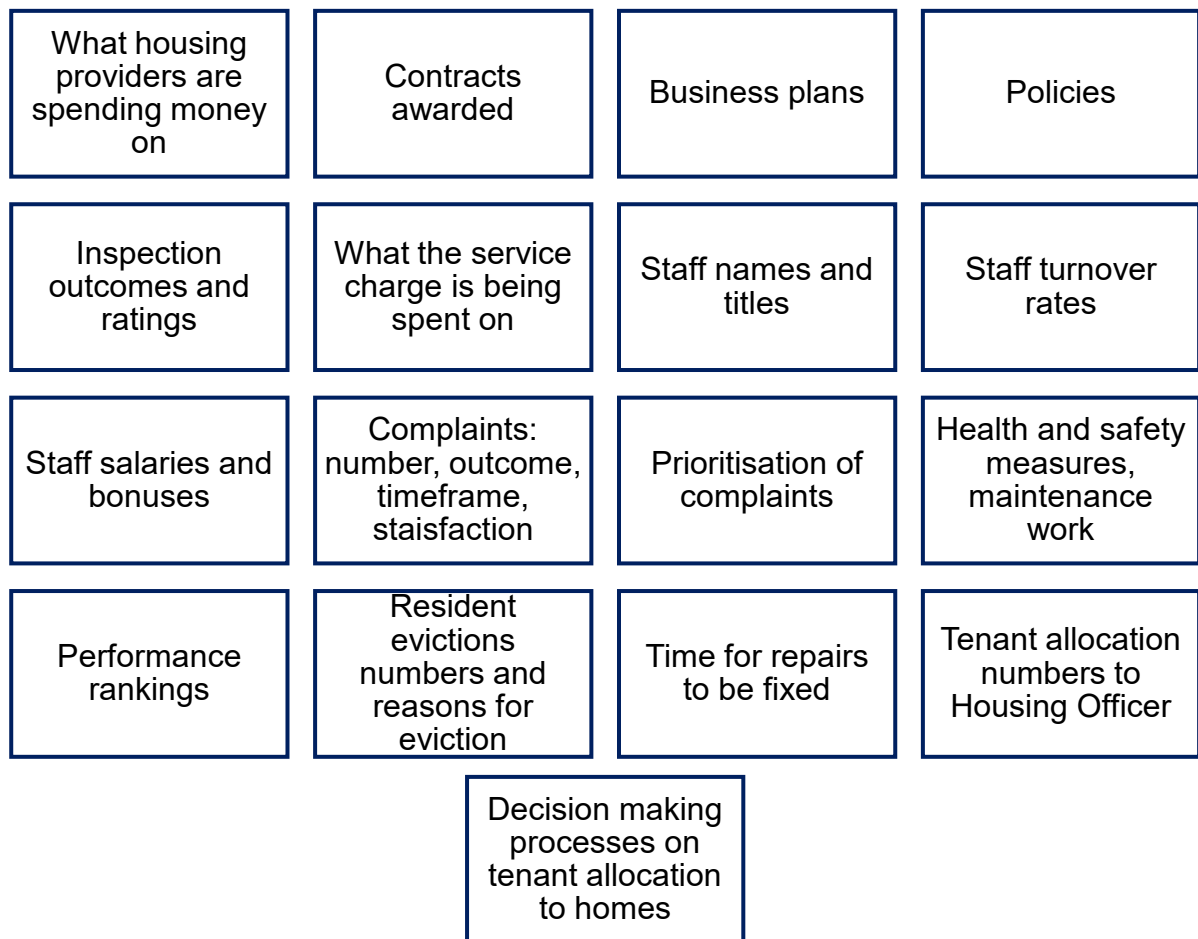
Publication Scheme

Through the Access to Information Scheme, housing providers will be required to proactively publish some types of information that will always be available to residents. This is known as a publication scheme.

Panel members welcomed the idea of a publication scheme. They felt it would increase transparency and give easy access to information of interest to residents. Some said it would allow residents to more easily hold their housing provider to account. For example, it would help them in their roles on resident panels.

When asked what a publication scheme should include, panel members spontaneously listed information about their housing provider.

Figure 6: Information panel members reported that should be included in a publication scheme



Housing provider responsibilities

Panel members discussed the process of requesting information from their housing provider. They stated that housing providers should proactively clarify requests with residents where they are unclear. This is to make sure residents get the information they want.

They thought that there needed to be clear rules on how quickly requests would be handled. Many panel members had experienced long complaint wait times and unsatisfactory outcomes. Due to these experiences, many worried they would have to wait a long time for housing providers to respond to requests.

Under the Access to Information Scheme, there will be situations where housing providers will be able to refuse a request for information. Information on these exceptions was shared with panel members.

Panel members felt that the proposed exceptions process may be exploited by housing providers. They used terms such as “get out of jail free card” and “a

loophole” to describe how exceptions may allow housing providers to “wriggle out” of giving information to residents. They felt housing providers would be motivated to do this when sharing information would expose poor housing provider practice or lead to additional work for the housing provider.

Housing Ombudsman

Panel members discussed the possibility of raising a complaint under the Access to Information Scheme with the Housing Ombudsman. This would be in situations where they do not reach an agreement with their housing provider about a request for information.

Concerns were raised about the time it would take for the Housing Ombudsman to follow up on complaints and their ability to get complaints resolved.

Panel members described experiencing long wait times when they had previously taken other complaints to the Housing Ombudsman. They were concerned that the Housing Ombudsman was not currently well staffed and may struggle to deal with the additional work that the Access to Information Scheme could generate. If the scheme is implemented, they would like to see response timelines clearly outlined and met.

Some felt previous complaints taken to the Housing Ombudsman had not been resolved and questioned if the Housing Ombudsman would be more effective for complaints relating to requests for information.

“I know someone who made a complaint to the Ombudsman in September and isn't getting a response until March.”

Male, 65+, South East



“The process laid out on paper looks great, but the reality of my experiences of dealing with it [the Housing Ombudsman] and my neighbours [means] I do not have the confidence with it.”

Female, 25 to 44, London

Many panel members felt the Housing Ombudsman should do more than publish reports that describe housing providers' failure to comply with its information sharing

requests. They believed fines or actions that would hold individual housing provider staff to account would be more powerful deterrents. They believed reports would:

- not result in individual complaints being resolved
- not encourage housing providers to make wider changes to improve the handling of resident complaints
- be published on lesser-known platforms where few people would see them

“[Housing providers] have no incentive...There is no-one hovering over them and will give them a big fine if they don't answer promptly. I feel it's far too weak.”

Female, 65 and over, South East



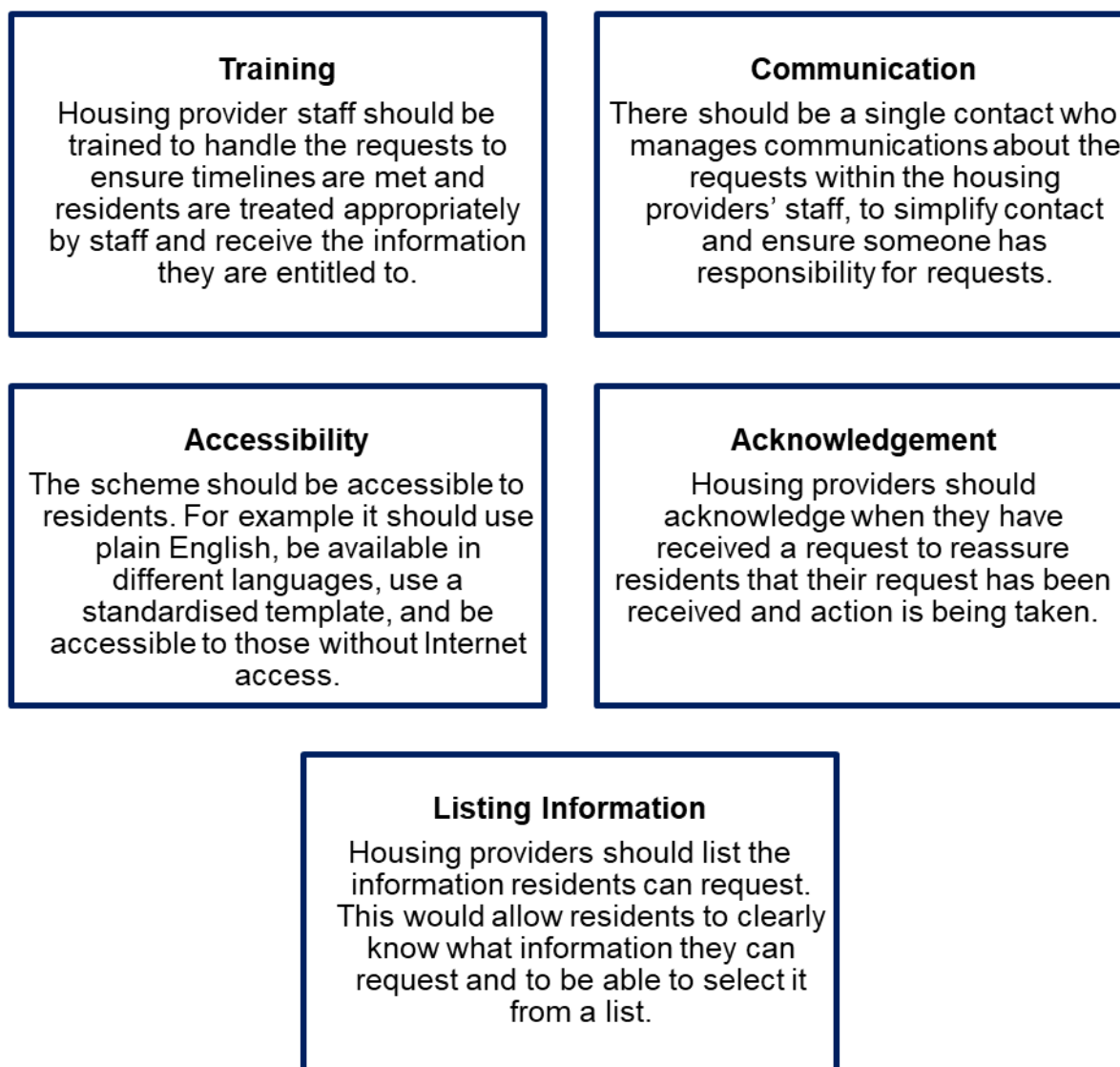
“We have to be talking about sanctions that impact on the professional lives of the senior management and the members of the board.”
Male, 55 to 64, London

A few panel members felt that complaints about a request under the Access to Information Scheme should be quickly taken to the Regulator of Social Housing. They believed the Regulator of Social Housing would be more effective at getting housing providers to comply than the Housing Ombudsman. However, others saw the two as holding similar powers over housing providers.

Suggested improvements

Panel members believed some things could be done to help ensure residents have good experiences when requesting information through the Access to Information Scheme.

Figure 7: Suggested improvements for the Access to Information Scheme



Support

Panel members were asked if they thought support should be offered to those requesting information through the scheme. They felt it was important support would be offered so that all residents would be able to use the Access to Information Scheme.

Panel members described ways that support could be offered, including:

- dedicated officers for the scheme to help support residents to make requests for information
- a network of residents across the country who offer guidance

- using case studies of making requests through the scheme to help residents understand how to use it

Communication

Finally, panel members discussed how they would like the Access to Information Scheme to be communicated to residents. They thought communicating the scheme to residents was important to ensure residents know they can access information from their housing provider. Communications should target all residents, not just those who are more engaged and part of resident panels.

Panel members wanted communications to come through many channels. These include social media, TV, radio, newspapers, posters in communal areas of social housing and community spaces, letters and annual newsletters from housing providers. Panel members stressed the importance of making all communications accessible, particularly for those with disabilities and no internet access.

Panel members felt communications should come from a range of sources. This included housing providers, DLUHC, the Housing Ombudsman and the Regulator of Social Housing.

Panel members had different views about the role housing providers should have in distributing information about the Access to Information Scheme. Some felt housing providers should share information. Others thought low levels of trust towards housing providers could mean residents would not trust any information they provide.

“Publicity. Tenants need to know that it's there and what it's for....housing association has to send a leaflet to every address telling them what it is and why it's there.”

Male, 55 to 64, South East



“From a tenant point of view, you are going to need something in the way of education, such as case studies and examples to show how it's going to be applied in practice.”

Male, 55 to 64, West Midlands

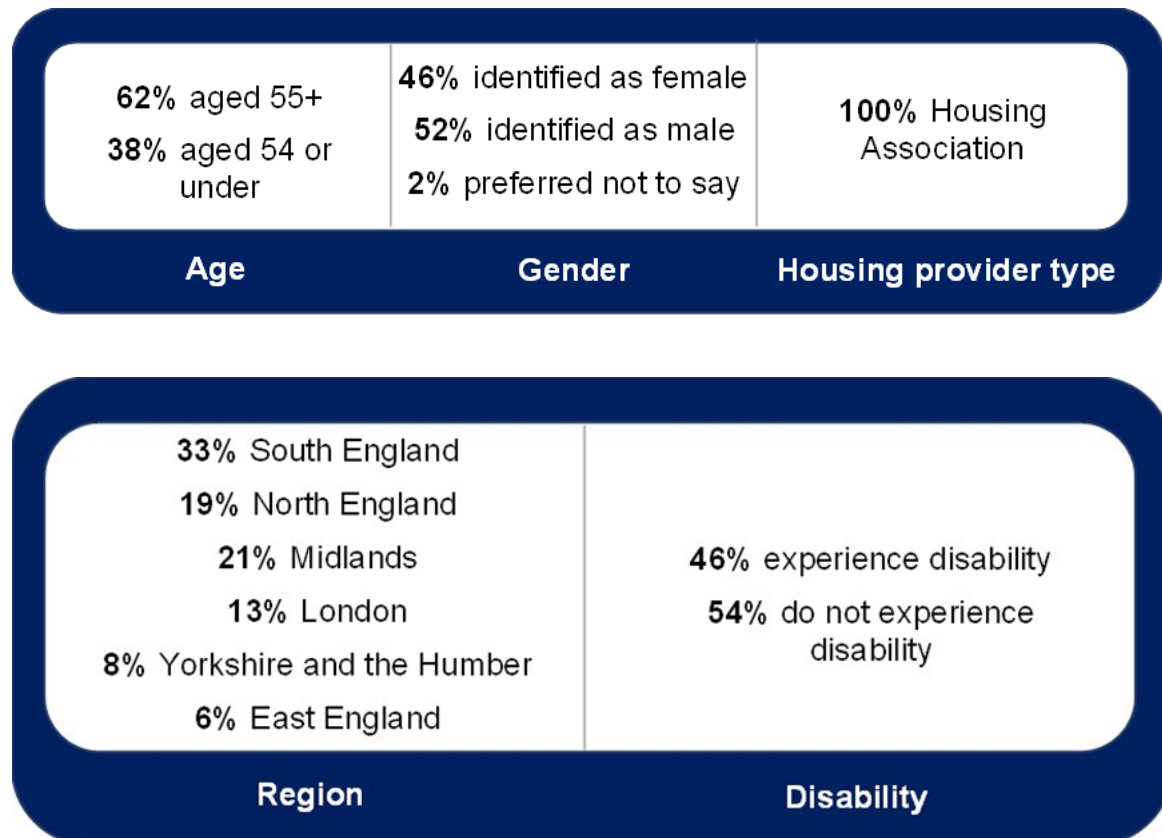
Appendix: Methodology and further information

Two focus group workshops were held on February 22 and February 25. They were conducted online on Zoom.

Workshops lasted 2 hours and 79 panel members were invited, with 48 attending in total. Not all panel members were invited to attend the first wave of workshops. Each panel member will be invited to attend a workshop during the 3 waves of engagement activities of the Social Housing Quality Resident Panel.

The selected 48 panel members lived in housing provided by private registered providers. This is because the Access to Information Scheme is only applicable to those living in housing provided by private registered providers. Figure 8 recaps the demographic sample of panel members.

Figure 8: Demographics of panel members



Further information

If you have further questions, you can get in touch with us at:

DLUHC

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Kantar Public

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