How to gather views on service quality
guidance for social landlords

SCOTTISH EXECUTIVE

Communities Scotland
Working for housing and regeneration

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Foreword

The needs and priorities of tenants and other people who use housing services are a central concern for landlords – and they are at the heart of the regulatory framework. The views of people using the services are a rich source of information that can help organisations to develop and improve those services, and this information isn't always captured or used as effectively as it might be. There are lots of reasons for this, and what has become clear through the process of developing this guidance is that both tenants and practitioners have a strong interest in this topic.

While there are legal frameworks for tenant participation and (for local authorities) for Best Value, landlords are free to decide how they should seek the views of individual tenants and other people using the housing service, who may include owners, shared owners, homeless people and other housing applicants. This guidance is about how to use the wide range of tried and tested approaches to gathering views from individual service users rather than the related, but slightly different, area of tenant participation, which has been well-covered elsewhere. It is aimed at housing staff who do not necessarily have previous experience or knowledge of research and consultation methods – though it will also interest those who do.

We recognise that landlord organisations vary enormously in their size, structure, aims, geographic location and tenant and resident population. There is no one 'right' way of doing things and the guidance should be treated as a useful resource, not a blueprint for how things should be done. While it gives fairly comprehensive coverage of research and consultation methods, different organisations will want to use it in different ways and at different times.

The guidance isn't meant to be read all at one sitting and we certainly don't expect every organisation to do everything described here. The emphasis is always on what is to be achieved by gathering views and what is the best way of doing that, in each case?

Doing more effective research and consultation doesn't always have to mean putting in more resources – sometimes it might just mean doing things differently. We hope this guidance will help to show you how.

Karen Watt
Director of Regulation & Inspection

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About this publication

How to gather views on service quality – guidance for social landlords was researched and written by Cathy Sharp and Sheena Murdoch of **Research for Real**. It was commissioned and published by the Regulation & Inspection division of Communities Scotland, the Scottish Executive's housing and regeneration agency. The Regulation & Inspection division inspects and regulates social housing in Scotland.

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Section 1
Introduction

1.1 Focus and purpose of the guidance

This guidance is to assist Registered Social Landlords (RSLs) and local authorities (LAs) to use service user feedback, research and consultation to develop and improve their services. It is designed to be used by both large and small social housing providers working in both urban and rural contexts. It establishes a number of key principles of quality in research and promotes a strategic and inclusive approach to customer research and consultation. It highlights a number of key practical issues and provides specific guidance on the use of some techniques and tools to gather service user feedback. It also provides signposts to other related guidance and resources.

The guidance is designed to provide clear and practical advice for staff within social landlord organisations that do not have specialist research knowledge. It is designed to encourage all approaches to service user feedback to be as inclusive as possible. The tools and techniques referred to can be used to assess service quality within both general needs and supported housing.

A number of perspectives have informed the development of this guidance. These include research undertaken with a range of landlords in Scotland, tenants' views, a review of existing guidance. It also reflects the views of Communities Scotland based on initial experience of the inspection process.

1.2 Policy background

The Regulation & Inspection Division of Communities Scotland is responsible for regulating both registered social landlords and the landlord, and homelessness functions of local authorities. Together with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorites and the Scottish Federation of Housing Associations, Communities Scotland has published a set of Performance Standards that form the core of the regulatory framework. These standards are organised into 20 Guiding Standards and 33 Activity Standards and provide clear expectations for social landlords[1]. The Guiding Standard GS3.1 on responsiveness to service users provides a clear statement that the regulator expects social landlords to demonstrate that they seek the views of all service users and that they respond to service users' views and priorities. Other guiding standards such as GS2.2 Tenant Participation and GS1.3 Commitment to Continuous Improvement are also relevant to the drive to improve performance and service standards in social housing. There is a statutory framework for tenant participation under the Housing (Scotland) Act 2001 in relation to registered tenant organisations. Where landlords have proposals that affect all tenants, they are expected to ensure that arrangements are in place to allow all tenants who wish to make their views known the opportunity to do so. Landlords have discretion to decide what form such consultation should take and it is likely that this will include both consultation with members of registered tenant organisations and

[1] *Performance Standards for social landlords and homelessness functions*, COSLA, Communities Scotland, SFHA, November 2001

individual tenants. A good practice framework for tenant participation in Scotland is available and provides a number of examples of techniques to encourage tenant participation which complement those provided here[2]. There is also a Guide to Successful Tenant Participation which complements this guidance[3].

Consultation is central to the assessment of Best Value, which became a statutory duty for local authorities under the Local Government in Scotland Act 2003[4]. Whilst local authorities are required to conduct service reviews, regular service or policy reviews are also likely to be necessary for RSLs. Seeking customer or service user feedback is an essential part of such reviews.

There is no universally accepted approach to conducting service or policy reviews. The focus of this guidance are approaches to gathering customer or service user views, largely on an individual basis, and this includes tenants, owners, shared owners, other residents, homeless people and other housing applicants.

The guidance promotes the engagement of service users in the process of seeking views on service quality. This includes engagement in the development of a strategic framework for research and consultation and in all stages of the processes of research design, data collection and analysis, reporting, action planning and monitoring. The guidance includes a number of participatory and group methods that may be used for service user research and consultation, as well as part of a tenant participation or consultation strategy.

This guidance is designed to meet the needs of the whole sector.

1.3 The focus of the inspection process

The needs and views of tenants and other service users are at the centre of the regulatory framework. There is a strong emphasis on assessing the way organisations use feedback and consultation to improve services, a focus on the outcomes of the process of consultation, rather than the process itself. It is important that the process of research and consultation is strategic and inclusive rather than an end in itself. The approaches adopted should be appropriate for the purpose intended, rather than being based on assumptions about regulatory expectations.

An analysis of recent inspections of RSLs and LAs by Communities Scotland for this guidance suggests that most social landlords engage in some form of tenant consultation and involvement, and many seek feedback at least on some aspects of their services[5]. However, a number of key issues are consistently referred to across a number of reports.

- There is little evidence of landlords taking a planned, strategic approach to research and consultation.

[2] *A Good Practice Framework for Tenant Participation in Scotland*, Ilene Campbell and John Flint, Communities Scotland Research Report 43, September 2004

[3] *Guide to Successful Tenant Participation*, Oct 2005, available at www.communitiesscotland.gov.uk

[4] *The Local Government in Scotland Act 2003 Best Value Guidance*, Scottish Executive, 2004

[5] This has been supplemented by the findings from *Key Themes from Inspections – Tenant Participation*, Communities Scotland, August 2005

- There is a need to make the best use of the information that is already available to landlords.

- Satisfaction surveys conducted every few years are fairly common, but there is little information on the quality of the surveys and the data is not always analysed fully.

- Most organisations do not collect feedback on a regular basis and there is a need for more regular feedback than that provided by occasional surveys.

- There is a need for complementary qualitative approaches to data collection.

- Landlords are not always using the findings to improve service delivery.

- Few landlords give feedback to those who participate in consultation exercises.

This assessment is consistent with other research findings which show that although public sector organisations use a range of different approaches to consultation and gathering customer feedback, there is limited evidence that this has an effective impact on the quality of decision-making[6]. A recent review of performance management in local authority housing services concluded that performance management and self-assessment are under-developed in many organisations[7]. The involvement of tenants in performance monitoring and service review and the collection and use of customer feedback information were among the areas identified as needing to be strengthened. Recent good practice guidance on performance management in housing refers to performance management as being as much about a set of values and embedding a particular organisational culture as adopting a particular system or framework[8]. Making gathering and using service user views part of the organisational culture that values feedback and is open to learning is one of the current challenges facing social landlords in Scotland.

The self-assessment questions on responsiveness to service users have been revised to reflect this guidance.

1.4 The principles of the guidance

This guidance is intended to be positive and practical. It is not prescriptive but aims to encourage fuller understanding of and confidence in using the full range of methodologies, both quantitative and qualitative, for researching service users' views. The emphasis is on assisting social landlords to address some of the deficiencies identified through the inspection process in order to achieve better practice.

The guidance refers to research and consultation. These terms are often used interchangeably in the wider literature. Our definition of research is any

[6]Stevenson, R and Gibson, P, (2002), *Customer and Citizen Focused Public Services*, Scottish Executive Central Research Unit

[7]Pawson, H et al (2004), Performance Management in Local Authority Housing Services: an Empirical Review, SHBVN & Communities Scotland

[8]Currie, A and Currie, H (2005) *Performance Management in Housing: A Good Practice Guide*, SHBVN and Communities Scotland

systematic approach to seeking feedback from customers or service users as individuals or groups. This includes both quantitative and qualitative methods and, importantly, is not confined to the use of statistically representative samples. Consultation is usually taken to mean some form of democratic process, sometimes a more participatory approach, which allows service users to give their views about a policy or service. Consultation exercises will often use qualitative methods, but with less attention to the rigour and quality of the approach than would be the case in a research process. Consultation is also used as an umbrella term, for example, in Best Value, to mean broadly 'seeking the views of customers'. Our approach is to refer to 'research and consultation' to encompass quantitative and qualitative research and consultation whether undertaken with individuals or groups and with varying degrees of participation in the process.

This guidance reflects the principles of the National Standards for Community Engagement and develops these in relation to the process of research and consultation[9]. The National Standards highlight:

- the importance of equality and recognising the diversity of people and communities;
- the importance of a clear sense of purpose;
- the use of effective methods for achieving change;
- the need to build on the skills and knowledge of all those involved; and
- a commitment to learning for continuous improvement.

1.5 How to use this guidance

This guidance is designed to be used in a number of ways depending on your interests and existing knowledge. It is possible to go straight to particular issues or principles and from there be signposted to related techniques and tools or to look up particular techniques, although it is not a detailed 'how to' guide to methods. Each section can also be read as a stand-alone section.

Whilst the coverage is intended to be fairly comprehensive, the selection reflects an attempt to address areas where there is a lack of understanding or confidence in the use of particular approaches or acknowledged weaknesses in implementation. The degree of depth of coverage does vary to reflect areas where contributors to the development of the guidance have asked for advice and where there is already adequate guidance available elsewhere. There is some overlap between techniques that can be used to gather service user feedback and performance management techniques. Where possible and appropriate the guidance signposts the reader to other relevant guidance on more specialist areas or techniques and to places where more up-to-date information is likely to be found.

A section on further resources and guidance with commentary is also included.

[9] National Standards for Community Engagement, Communities Scotland, 2005

Section 2

Key principles of quality in research and consultation

2.1 Introduction

Ensuring quality in research and consultation requires detailed attention to the design and execution of all stages of the research process.

2.2 Key principles of quality in research and consultation

This section identifies 10 key principles of quality in research and consultation that inform this guidance and which are reflected in the self-assessment questions for Guiding Standard GS3.1 on responsiveness to service users.

Develop a strategic framework for service user consultation

To improve services, social housing organisations need to make the best use of information they have already on quality of services and they need to regularly collect and use feedback from service users.

To achieve this, it is essential for organisations to develop a clearly articulated research and consultation strategy. This should underpin a programme of service user feedback that serves organisational objectives and priorities and delivers high quality, useful and timely information that can be acted upon by the organisation. It should engage service users in the process of developing the framework.

A research and consultation strategy should dovetail with the Tenant Participation strategy and with other relevant frameworks such as Best Value. It might be an element of the Tenant Participation strategy. The strategy needs to be proportionate and suited to the operating context of the organisation and resources available to different social landlords. This is not intended to be an additional bureaucratic burden on landlords and it doesn't need to be a long or complicated document. However, without explicit, strategic consideration of the operating environment, the purpose and use of the consultation, the resources available and how research and consultation is conducted and communicated, the value of service user consultation is likely to be undermined, even in the smallest organisations.

Figure 2.1 A strategic framework for service user consultation

	Key requirements
Operating environment	• An understanding of the broader operating and regulatory environment and any statutory obligations or more informal expectations. • An overview of the wider organisational operating climate and any linkages or synergies between different departmental needs or those of peer organisations.
Purpose & use	• A clear vision of what is expected to be achieved through research and consultation with service users. • Clear links between research and consultation and action planning and implementation. • Clear links between the organisation's strategic objectives and individual research and consultation exercises. • A long-term perspective and clear rationale for identifying and prioritising needs for research and consultation. • Collection of feedback on a routine, regular basis, as well as more occasional specific research and consultation exercises. • The ability to identify specific gaps in knowledge, prior to gathering new information. • A utilisation-focused research approach; an applied and practical use for individual research and consultation exercises.
Resources	• A full assessment of resources required to deliver the research and consultation strategy. • Full use of existing management information. • Awareness of other relevant strategies, standards and frameworks such as Tenant Participation, Community Engagement and Best Value. • Full use of existing contacts with service users such as registers of interested tenants or user groups and opportunities to gather information from staff. • Appropriate IT systems available to capture and analyse data. • Recognition of realistic timescales for individual research and consultation exercises.
Conduct	• Adoption of key principles of quality in the conduct of the research and consultation. • Awareness of alternative feasible options for research design and use of diversity of approaches to reach different groups of service users. • Awareness of the potential burden of participation in research and consultation exercises and avoidance of 'over-researching' a particular topic or group.
Communication	• Good quality communication about the purpose and intended use of the information sought. • Feedback to service users, members of staff, committee members or councillors about what has happened as a result of the research and consultation.

Adopt a utilisation focus to research

The main principle underlying quality in research and consultation is that the research design must be led by purpose and use. It is essential that the purposes of the research and how the findings will be used are clear.

Utilisation-focused research (UFR) is a process that considers how everything that is done as part of the research and consultation exercise will affect how the findings are used[10]. The focus on use is very specific; it is about how findings can be used in an applied and practical way and this focus should be treated as the lens through which to view and guide the planning and implementation of all stages of the research.

UFR requires that the intended users of the research are identified; users may include both primary users who have a major stake in the research and secondary users who have a more peripheral interest. UFR also requires negotiation over the extent to which the interests of all users can be accommodated within the available resources. Clear, negotiated agreement should be reached about the uses of the research and consultation findings and this should include a close scrutiny of how the decisions taken about research design will affect intended use.

UFR enables the development of robust, relevant research questions: clear identification of who should be researched and under what circumstances and the most appropriate research methods through which to gather information.

Practice point

- Research and consultation should be designed to support and achieve the intended use by the primary and secondary users.

Whilst the UFR approach is relevant to all research and consultation, the section on planning and designing useful surveys develops the UFR approach further.

Use appropriate methods

The purposes and uses of the research will determine the choice of appropriate methods.

There is no one 'best' research method although some techniques are better suited for some types of research than others. Quantitative methods lend themselves more readily to summary assessments of experience or establishing benchmarks. Qualitative and participatory techniques are more suited to developing deeper understanding of perspectives and expectations and may promote dialogue with and between service users.

[10] This is based on the ideas of utilisation-focused evaluation. See www.wmich.edu/evalctr/checklists/ufechecklist.htm

Organisations may be more familiar with quantitative methods such as surveys that emphasise that samples of service users should be statistically representative so that conclusions can be drawn about the views or attributes of all service users. If appropriate samples are selected, statistical analysis can isolate the influence of different factors which may influence views and allow comparisons to be made between the views of different service users and between the views of members of a particular group and a wider population.

Qualitative methods provide an equally valid, but different form of information about service user opinions. They can provide a depth of understanding about what drives those opinions and rich, useful data that can illuminate reasons for levels of satisfaction or dissatisfaction. Stories of service successes or failure gathered in this way may unlock apparent paradoxes or explain the persistence of dissatisfaction or complaints, even if among a relatively small number of customers. Qualitative methods are particularly useful to give voice to groups of customers who may be numerically small amongst the wider population, but whose views are important in shaping services that meet their particular needs.

It may be appropriate to use a mix of methods to provide information that is both broad and deep. Combining methods to investigate the same problem may enhance the validity of the findings and strengthen the conclusions which may be drawn from them, particularly if the findings from one method are corroborated by findings from other methods.

Use of a range of methods is also good practice in that it recognises diversity among service users and that not all groups will wish to or be able to engage with standard methods.

Practice point

- Using a combination of methods can enhance the quality of data collected, strengthen the validity of the findings and promote greater inclusion in the research process.

Ensure methods used are fit for purpose

It may be tempting to use 'off the shelf' research packages that produce standardised questionnaires, to use existing surveys produced for an earlier research exercise or to use approaches marketed by contractors. All of these may have a superficial appeal of a readily available methodology. However, by definition they are prescriptive. Off-the-shelf surveys marketed by contractors are unlikely to have a focus on use as they are not designed for use in the specific, local context. Surveys are often designed to provide standardised information to measure comparative performance and change over time and they may be difficult to adapt for other research exercises. For example, it may be difficult to make changes to a questionnaire or to the wording of individual questions and this will reduce the quality and relevance of data collected in this way. As a result, they offer few advantages over a bespoke survey design.

Practice point

- The methods used should be fit for the intended purpose, appropriate to the context in which they are used and well executed.

Rethink representation

Much research and consultation pursues the goal of achieving 'representativeness'. This is often a democratic goal which aims to include a range of people's views. It also has a statistical meaning. The different ideas about representativeness tend to get mixed up and can be a cause of concern amongst social housing organisations if, for example, they feel that poor response rates are undermining the basis of the research findings or that the views of numerically small or dispersed groups of service users are overlooked. It may be more important to ensure that all service users have opportunities to make their views known through a diversity of approaches, than to pursue a goal of strict statistical representativeness that is very difficult to achieve in practice and may not be necessary.

The quality and usefulness of research may be enhanced by rethinking what is meant by representativeness for each research context. Meaningful representation is discussed more thoroughly in Section 3.

Practice point

- Meaningful representation rests on the idea that all service users have opportunities to make their views known through the use of a diverse range of methods, but recognises that some people will not be interested in giving their views, whatever efforts are made by their landlord to seek them.

Define the research population clearly

It is important that the precise population in which the research and consultation is interested is defined very clearly. For example, this could be tenants, residents, shared owners, homeless people or other housing applicants, all users of a specific service or those who have not used the service. Research focused on tenants will not capture the views of other members of the household, particularly young people, which may be important within a wider community context.

Clear definitions of the research population will affect decisions about how to sample and will encourage greater awareness of those who are either not the focus of the specific research or who might be overlooked. For example, failing to clarify and implement a precise definition of which service users the research is interested in is likely to lead to wasted efforts due to the possible inclusion of non-service users or service users without recent experience of the service under review. An inadequate definition may also result in the exclusion of those who have important perspectives to offer.

These kinds of errors are often made because of efforts to be 'representative'. This is addressed above and in Section 3. Definitions of the research population are linked to how sampling can be undertaken.

Practice point

- Define the precise group of service users that you are interested in and ensure that this is adhered to in the way that the research is implemented.

Ensure the research and consultation is inclusive

Service users are not all the same. There is likely to be a wide range of social, cultural and economic differences amongst service users. Some may be vulnerable or may have particular needs which impact on their ability to participate.

This means that a one-size-fits-all approach to researching service users is inappropriate and is likely to yield poor quality and often misleading results. To capture and understand the views of a diverse range of people research and consultation strategies need to be designed so that the research is as inclusive as possible. This means that the needs of all groups must be recognised and a range of different research approaches that are sensitive to these needs must be adopted. Good practice to promote the participation of excluded and vulnerable groups will also reduce barriers to participation for all groups. These issues are addressed more fully in the section on making research and consultation as inclusive as possible.

Practice point

- Recognise the diversity amongst service users and ensure that the design and execution of the research and consultation minimises barriers to participation.

Engage service users in the process

For research to be robust, useful and as inclusive as possible, it is important that service users are involved from the outset. Research and consultation that is based largely on the landlord's assumptions, requirements and perspectives is likely to produce low response rates and poor quality data. This is a contributory factor to common complaints of research fatigue from both social housing organisations and service users themselves.

Landlords should aim to work in partnership with service users to develop a strategic framework for service user consultation and a shared understanding of the issues of implementation.

Practice point

- Research and consultation strategies need to be developed in consultation with service users so that the research and consultation is as relevant and inclusive as possible.

The quality, relevance and usefulness of research and consultation processes may be enhanced by service user participation in other aspects of the process including research design, data collection and analysis, reporting and action planning and monitoring and review. Most research approaches can be adapted to involve service users, but qualitative and participatory techniques are particularly useful in this respect. Other benefits may arise from greater service user involvement in research and consultation. See the section on using research to promote participation and build capacity for more guidance.

Many of the approaches used as part of Tenant Participation strategies, such as public meetings, panels or user groups can be adapted for the wider purposes of research and consultation. Pre-existing groups can be used for group interviews. Individual research and consultation exercises can make use of more participatory methods, as appropriate, in order to engage service users more directly in the research process and bring other benefits.

Practice point

- Service user involvement in all stages of the research and consultation process may enhance the quality, relevance and usefulness of the data.

Adopt ethical research practices

An important issue for the quality of any research is whether it has been conducted in an ethical manner. Ethics refers to the rules of research conduct and matters of ethics should be considered from the outset of the research.

One of the key ethical concerns that affect research quality is objectivity. A central part of ethical research practice is to consider and avoid the risk of potential biases or skewed perspectives in design, implementation, analysis and writing. Biases may arise in many aspects of research including the design of the sample, question wording, poor response rates, the composition of a focus group and the identity and values of the researcher.

One of the reasons that organisations prefer to commission external researchers to undertake research and consultation is that they believe them to be more detached than in-house staff. However, all researchers, whether in-house or external contractors, bring their own perspectives and values to the research process. It is the rigour of detecting and dealing with bias and attention to conducting high quality research and consultation that is most likely to enhance objectivity, rather than the status of the researchers themselves.

Ethical issues are discussed more fully in Section 3.

Practice point

- Improving objectivity and ethical practice in research and consultation requires addressing possible causes of bias and practising high quality research.

Use feedback for learning and action

It is a regulatory expectation that social landlords seek the views of all service users and that they respond to service users' views and priorities. However, this should not be seen as a regulatory burden that can be satisfied by the occasional satisfaction survey. It is crucial that social landlords use feedback from service users for learning and action.

A key principle in judging the quality of research and consultation is that landlords should seek feedback and that landlords should be able to demonstrate that feedback has led to learning and action – to actual changes in the way services are delivered. This relates to the principle of adopting a utilisation focus to research and refers to the outcomes of the UFR process.

An important aspect of using feedback for learning and action is that the findings of research and consultation should be reported to service users and other interested parties, and that they should be told what changes have been made as a result. This will help to encourage a greater awareness of the purpose of research and consultation and may encourage future participation. Planned changes should be monitored and kept under review as part of an ongoing research and consultation strategy. Action points should be cross-referenced in the Action Plan for the service team.

Practice point

- Research and consultation that seeks feedback on service quality should demonstrate a clear link with outcomes in terms of changes to service delivery. Service users should be told how their views have influenced change.

2.3 Assessing quality in research and consultation

Social landlords will often need to assess the quality of research and consultation. Figure 2.2 proposes some criteria by which to assess both quantitative and qualitative research, principally for use with written research outputs. They are not meant to be applied rigidly or prescriptively, but are an aid to informed judgement, which must also draw on professional experience and the weighting that might be given to particular criteria in specific contexts. Further guidance on the assessment of qualitative research is available elsewhere[11].

It is suggested that the findings of the research are given attention first, as this will assist in assessing features of the research and consultation process.

[11] *Quality and Qualitative Evaluation: A framework for assessing research evidence*, Liz Spencer et al, Cabinet Office, 2003

Figure 2.2 Criteria for assessing quality in research and consultation

Findings and interpretation	● Are the findings based in the evidence presented, or do they draw inferences based on external material or opinion? If so, is this clearly stated? ● Do the conclusions/findings make sense and have a coherent logic? ● Does the research explain key concepts and definitions that it employs? ● Does the research address the aims and objectives as set out in the brief or as redefined during the study? ● What is the scope for drawing wider inferences from the findings and how well is this explained? ● Is there any reason to think that the evidence presented here may not be applicable in other contexts or not apply to particular groups of people? (eg urban/rural; men/women) ● Is there any reason to think that important contextual or other factors may have altered since the research was undertaken?
Research design, sampling and data collection	● Is the case made for different features of the research design to meet the aims of the study? ● Were the research methods used appropriate to the questions being asked? ● How appropriate is the sample design or selection of cases? ● Were the methods conducted properly – is there information on how the approaches were implemented? (eg response rates for surveys, sampling information, copy of questionnaires/questions used).
Analysis	● Has comprehensive, appropriate and accurate analysis been conducted? ● Are the issues considered from a range of perspectives?
Reporting and action	● How clear and coherent is the reporting? ● Is there a clear link between the data, interpretation and conclusions? ● Are the key messages highlighted and summarised? ● Are the research outputs presented in an appropriate format for the audiences? ● Does the research identify the implications for practical action in terms of service delivery?
Reflexivity and objectivity	● Are the assumptions, theoretical perspectives and values that have shaped the research made explicit? ● Is there evidence of openness to new and alternative ways of viewing the subject? ● Is there awareness of the limitations of the approach, methods and evidence and discussion of possible bias?
Ethics and access	● Were appropriate ethical guidelines adhered to? (eg confidentiality, anonymity, informed consent) ● Is there evidence of sensitivity to the particular context and participants? ● Did the research make provision to enable the participation of all relevant parties? ● Did the researchers have sufficient level and type of experience to undertake the research?
Audit	● Has the research process been well-documented? ● Is there documentation and discussion of changes to the research design? ● Are the main study documents included?

Section 3

Concerns and challenges in research and consultation

3.1 Concerns and challenges

3.1.1 Overcoming research fatigue

Research fatigue is frequently the problem underlying poor response rates and insufficient, inadequate data. It can be experienced by both researchers and respondents and commonly relates to problems with:

- Clarity of research purpose
- Research methods
- Research execution
- Practical action and outcomes based on research results

Some typical features of respondent and researcher fatigue in relation to these four aspects are summarised in Figure 3.1 on the next page.

Figure 3.1 Features of research fatigue

	Respondent fatigue	Researcher fatigue
Clarity of purpose	● Topic is irrelevant and uninteresting to respondents irrespective of data collection methods. ● Research questions are decided by landlords and are irrelevant to respondents. ● Research may be carried out too late (after the event).	● Researchers feel research lacks clarity of purpose. ● Researchers feel research fails to ask questions that are genuinely useful.
Research methods	● Respondents are tired of responding to 'same old' data collection methods (eg questionnaires, feedback forms) irrespective of research topic. ● Research methods used do not energise or engage respondents.	● Researchers are experienced in one or two methods but lack confidence to try others. ● Research methods used do not energise or engage researchers.
Research execution	● Topic relevant and interesting to respondents but respondents are tired of irrelevant questions or methods of data collection, particularly if respondents have already voiced discontent and are feeling that 'nothing changes'.	● Researchers feel anxious that data quality is poor due to poorly worded questions, etc. ● Researchers feel that research is restricted by clients brief/regulatory frame-works/demands for 'hard', 'transparent' data. ● Researchers feel research is restricted by resources (time, money, personnel, etc).
Practical action & outcomes	● Respondents are frustrated at spending time giving their opinions yet receiving no feedback about research findings. ● Respondents are frustrated with receiving feedback that seems misleading or lacks credibility (eg feedback such as 80% said X, when respondent knows that survey response rate was 20%). ● Respondents receive feedback but changes arising from the research do not happen.	● Researchers do not see much changing as a result of the research findings. ● Researchers feel frustrated that research may have raised respondents' expectations but changes as a result of the research are unlikely to happen.

Research for this guidance suggests that landlords are experiencing researcher and respondent fatigue in all four aspects. Overcoming research fatigue requires open, truthful and rigorous thinking about *why* fatigue is occurring and about what landlords can *realistically* do to counter it. The principles on which this guidance is based are designed to address these issues.

There is no quick fix to the issue of research fatigue. A strategic approach to service user research and consultation and the engagement of service users themselves in that process will help to ensure that research is relevant and has a clear purpose. Building on this, a utilisation-focused research approach helps to develop robust and relevant research questions that are practical and clearly linked to action to improve services.

There is a strong emphasis in this guidance on using existing information and resources rather than always collecting new data, making better use of feedback from staff, collecting more regular information and integrating research and consultation into existing contacts with service users and groups.

Where new data collection is required, there are a range of more innovative tools and techniques included that are less commonly used but which may help to re-energise the research and consultation process. These include a range of qualitative and participatory techniques. An action research approach is one way to provide more 'real-time' and practical feedback about what's working in the delivery of services.

3.1.2 Representativeness: how important is it?

Great value is often attached to ideas about representativeness in research and consultation. This is because researchers often want to be able to generalise their findings to a larger population. In fact, this can only be done if the sample under study is statistically representative of the larger population from which it was drawn.

True statistical representativeness is actually very difficult and costly to achieve. In fact, it is doubtful whether sampling bias can be sufficiently removed to achieve truly representative statistical samples and it is not a matter of certainty that sample findings can be generalised to the larger population; calculations are needed to state the degree of confidence that can be placed on statistics based on samples.

Often results are claimed to be representative, although these claims do not stand up to scrutiny when sampling strategies are examined. Attempts to achieve statistical representativeness in research and consultation exercises are rarely feasible or successful and may hinder the use of approaches that might be more realistic, meaningful and useful.

Decisions about whether a survey sample design should be based on the goal of statistical representativeness will depend on the purpose of the survey. To be strictly statistically representative, a sample should be selected on a random or probability basis. See the section on sampling for more information. This is only really necessary if you wish to be able to make claims about the wider population on the basis of your sample by calculating inferential statistics. This is rarely a major concern of general satisfaction surveys and would be costly to achieve. It is more likely to be important that samples for general satisfaction surveys are distributed across the target population in proportion, so that key variables such as area office patches or tenants and owners are included in the same proportion that they occur in the overall population. Some kind of stratified or quota sampling is likely to be adequate for most purposes. Sample size is also a key issue. Procedures to select cases to fulfil quotas should also minimise systematic bias. All these issues are dealt with in more detail in the section on sampling.

Research for this guidance suggests that some landlords (and service users themselves) are concerned about low response rates to surveys. Poor response rates do, of course, undermine representativeness and it is right to be concerned about this. However, the problem may be more fundamental than finding a technical fix by offering incentives and so on.

A more fundamental rethink about appropriate methods may be required; although research for this guidance suggests that some landlords are now reconciled to the difficulties of strict statistical representativeness in surveys, other landlords' concerns about achieving an elusive strict statistical representativeness may undermine their confidence in the validity of other research approaches and methods that might be more meaningful and useful.

It is important to understand that using statistics is not the only way of being representative and of being able to generalise from research findings. The pursuit of representativeness and generalisability is present in the use of other methods and approaches but the concepts may be treated differently. For example, most qualitative research researchers want to know 'what's going on', so it is important to study the processes that will clarify and validate 'what's going on'. Therefore, sampling is not based on probability theory and randomness, nor are samples drawn on the basis of how statistically representative they are of a larger population. Rather, samples are selected through 'theoretical sampling' which enables sampling of whatever phenomena will provide valuable information on issues of importance and people are sampled on the basis that they are 'cultural experts' who are able to shed light on 'what's going on'.

Generalisability in qualitative research is gained through constantly comparing between different groups undergoing the same processes. For example, if the researcher thinks they have a reasonably good descriptive understanding of one event, then they should also examine other similar events and compare them. This enables common themes and differences across different groups to be identified.

We think the ideas of 'meaningful representativeness' or 'participatory representativeness' are often more useful in research and consultation and apply across the whole range of approaches as part of a strategic approach to consultation. Meaningful representation recognises that some people will not be interested in giving their views, whatever efforts are made by their landlord to seek them, but does not absolve the landlord of the responsibility to ensure that they have a number of opportunities to do so if they wish. Meaningful or participatory representativeness would aim to ensure that all tenants and residents have opportunities to make their views known, through the use of a variety of diverse methods, conducted in ways that are as inclusive as possible and designed to provide actionable information for the landlord.

Practice point

- Be clear about the purpose and the use of your research. Pursuing statistical representativeness may not be the most appropriate way to achieve the depth and clarity of understanding about topics that you need. Your research purpose and use of findings may require you to use approaches and methods that do not always treat representativeness as statistical.

3.1.3 Assessing satisfaction and expectations

Understanding and measuring service user satisfaction is a central concern of research and consultation amongst social landlords. Satisfaction is a widely accepted concept despite real difficulties in measuring and interpreting typical approaches to its assessment. The most common approach is the use of general satisfaction surveys undertaken every few years and designed to track changes over time.

There are a number of difficulties with the concept of satisfaction.

- It is not static, but changes over time; new experiences and levels of awareness will alter the potential levels of satisfaction that could be achieved.

- It is likely to be complex and the result of a mix of experiences before, during and after the point at which it is measured.

- It occurs in social contexts which are varied and changing and may be unpredictable or inexpressible to the service user.

- It may be difficult to express the reasons for satisfaction; particularly where less tangible aspects of services are being considered.

- It may be easier to express the reasons for dissatisfaction, particularly if this is the exceptional state.

- Without understanding the causes of satisfaction, there is a danger that a landlord might treat a 'good result' as a reason not to change anything, seeing it largely as a PR tool.

A typical way of measuring satisfaction is to use a five-point scale which ranges from 'very satisfied' to 'very dissatisfied'. This approach has the value of simplicity and consistency. However, a utilisation focused approach will follow this up with a question that asks for reasons for the answer, whether positive or negative. Without this follow up, there is no opportunity to check that this is a valid measure of satisfaction to the individual. In addition, although it might be possible to track change over time by repeating the approach, the reasons for any change and what action would be required to sustain it would not be understood. There is a need for further questioning or follow up with another approach, such as a focus group.

Understanding expectations

Social landlords tend to treat high levels of satisfaction as a measurement of high service quality, but service quality and satisfaction are not necessarily the same thing. The role of expectations is crucial. Satisfaction occurs when expectations are met or exceeded. The main problem with typical questions about satisfaction is that they make assumptions about expectations of services that may not be part of the individual's idea of satisfaction, which could be very wide ranging, varied and quite at odds with the assumptions of the landlord organisation. There are many sources of service users' expectations:[12]

- personal needs
- previous experience
- word of mouth communication
- explicit service communication
- views about government
- values and beliefs
- implicit service communications.

The nature and impact of each of these influences will vary for different people and services. It is not clear how expectations and satisfaction ratings interact. It may be that lower expectations produce higher satisfaction ratings, as in such circumstances it should be easier to pleasantly surprise customers. Alternatively, lower expectations may make it harder to achieve higher satisfaction ratings. Expectations are discussed more fully elsewhere [13].

In typical satisfaction surveys, priority tends to be given to issues that social landlords deem to be important, rather than checking out assumptions about service users' expectations. To assess expectations it is important to identify service characteristics so that it is clear how the different dimensions of service provision are valued. An example of these dimensions is included in the section on Servqual which is a technique that measures both expectations and perceptions.

A practical modification of the satisfaction survey approach would be to undertake pre-survey qualitative work to explore expectations amongst customers which could then be built into the design of the questions.

[12] *Public Service Reform, Measuring and Understanding Customer Satisfaction*, MORI, 2002
[13] MORI, 2002 Ibid

Types of rating scales

It is not possible to provide a review of different approaches to assessing satisfaction and expectations in this guidance. However, it is worth commenting on the use of rating scales. Studies of satisfaction show that the common aggregation of 'very' and 'fairly' satisfied responses will cover a very wide range of service experiences and attitudes and hence, also a fairly large proportion of the customer base. Whilst very satisfied generally did represent a positive statement, fairly satisfied could well be taken to mean 'I am not very satisfied'.

There are a number of different types of rating scales that can be used to measure attitudes each of which will produce different responses:

- satisfaction scale ('How satisfied are you with ...?') with the response choices being 'very satisfied', 'satisfied', 'neither satisfied nor dissatisfied', 'dissatisfied', and 'very dissatisfied';

- performance scale ('Overall how would you rate...') with choices such as 'very good', 'good', 'fair' etc;

- expectations scale ('Overall, compared with what you expected, how would you rate...') with choices such as 'much better than expected', 'better than expected', 'about as expected', etc;

- improvement scale ('Indicate the amount of improvement, if any, that is needed') with choices such as 'none', 'slight', 'some', 'much', and 'huge';

- compared to the ideal scale ('Compared to the ideal ..., how would you rate ...?') with the response choices being: 'very good', 'good', 'fair', 'poor', and 'very poor'; and

- recommend scale (How likely are you to recommend ... to a friend') with the response choices being 'very likely', 'likely', 'neither likely nor unlikely', 'unlikely', and 'very unlikely'.

Overall performance and satisfaction scales tend to receive higher average ratings. In the light of the range of responses encompassed in the widely used satisfaction scales, it may be worth using scales that result in less favourable and more testing assessments.

Measuring satisfaction and expectations

There are a number of useful lessons in relation to the measurement of satisfaction and expectations.

- In relation to validity, it is important to ensure that what is measured reflects all the different elements of satisfaction and to make sure that social landlords know what's important to their service users, in their language, not in the language of the organisation.

- In terms of consistency, it is important to make sure the process of measurement is reliable and consistent across different customer groups and over time.

- Adopting a utilisation focused approach will ensure that the results are specific enough to act on and that sufficient information is collected to define priorities for change.

- In relation to needs and expectations, it is important to focus on identifying customer needs and expectations and whether these are being met, rather than on appraising existing services. The interpretation of findings must be undertaken in the light of knowledge of expectations.

- It is also important to take a long term, strategic approach to measuring change over time in expectations and satisfaction.

3.1.4 Making the most of what you already know

The focus of this guidance is the collection of new information about the quality of services from service users. However, it is likely that inspectors will expect landlords to make the full use of the existing information that is already available to them. This includes existing information collected for administrative and management purposes and information collected through previous research and consultation exercises. It should also include use of pre-existing groups where appropriate for research and consultation purposes. New data collection is expensive and time consuming and may not always be necessary.

As an example, it may be possible to use data collected for administrative and management purposes to produce aggregated information about service use. It is important to acknowledge data protection issues; this means that you should be aware of where the data was generated from and that its reuse does not compromise the original undertaking given about its use.

3.1.5 Getting more regular information

One of the difficulties with many common approaches to research and consultation is that they tend to be occasional or 'ad hoc' exercises that may be time consuming and costly. These may not produce useful, actionable information based on recent experience. Often they provide summative information after a project or initiative has completed rather than formative information that can help to develop and adapt an initiative as it proceeds.

It is likely to be necessary to consider how to gather service users' views on a more frequent basis. There is interest amongst social landlords in getting more 'real time' feedback. Action research works in this way by testing out ideas as they are developed to provide feedback about what's working and how. Adaptation of other research and consultation approaches may also be able to provide more formative and frequent information.

- It may be possible to make better use of existing sources of information and staff-customer contact; data collection systems may require relatively simple adaptation to enable them to provide fuller information for feedback purposes.

- Survey design and sampling techniques may be adapted to produce more frequent data and continuous monitoring surveys used.

- Analysis of comments, compliments and complaints can also be a valuable source of feedback.

- Making the most of feedback from staff will also be likely to produce useful insights on a more routine basis.

- Techniques such as significant event analysis can also yield more regular data by focusing on particular incidents considered significant, in order to learn and improve. This could be used with staff, service users or existing groups.

Smaller scale, targeted and clearly focused approaches will also be less resource intensive and able to complement occasional larger research and consultation exercises. Clarity of purpose and a strong utilisation-focus will avoid the temptation to tackle too broad a range of issues within one exercise, which will tend to run the risk of not providing the depth of information that can be clearly acted upon.

3.1.6 Measuring change over time

Any social housing organisation is likely to be interested in trends in performance over time. See Moray Council (page 44) for example. It is important to consider how central to the purpose of the research and consultation this interest is. Measuring change over time brings a number of technical issues to the fore about the continuing validity of the measures used. For example, consistency of approach and question wording will be necessary to be certain that it is real change that is being measured, rather than a change in the measures themselves. This brings the risk that organisations will continue to measure issues that are less of a contemporary concern and may feel stuck with using the same questions long after their usefulness has expired.

Measuring change over time is a particular concern in satisfaction surveys. It is possible that changes in responses to satisfaction ratings over time reflect other changes rather than a change in performance. This could be because:

- the profile of customers has changed;
- the reputation or image of the service has changed; or
- expectations of services in general have changed.

To understand these changes more fully, it will be necessary to interpret these findings in the light of knowledge about the make up of the client base. An influx of younger tenants might change expectations. Knowing how expectations vary between different customer groups and tracking this will help to understand change over time.

Another approach would be to track changes by using retrospective rating questions. This approach has been used in evaluations of regeneration activity and could be adapted for general surveys. Responses to baseline and follow up surveys may show no real differences in satisfaction ratings. However, also asking whether the performance has got better or worse, or stayed the same will show any shifts in perceptions of change.

3.1.7 Using research to promote participation and build capacity

The focus of this guidance is approaches to gathering customer or service user views largely on an individual basis, undertaken within a strategic approach to service user feedback. This is likely to be in addition to or as part of a broader tenant participation strategy. However, the distinction between the two approaches is often blurred. With clear planning and purpose, many methods commonly associated with tenant participation, such as public meetings, workshops and conferences can be used to provide feedback on service quality. There is certainly scope to make better use of existing groups (whether formal registered tenants' organisations or not), for research and consultation purposes, in order to make research and consultation as inclusive as possible.

Many methods outlined here can be adapted to be used in a more or less participatory way, depending on the broader purposes of the exercise. In this way, how these exercises are conducted may contribute to the quality of life, community regeneration and capacity building goals of social housing organisations.

The value of greater participation in research and consultation

There are sound reasons for adopting a more participatory approach to research and consultation on service quality. Greater participation draws on a wider pool of knowledge and diversity of experiences. It makes it more difficult to overlook the perhaps small in number, but important group of people, that have some valuable insight and experience that gets lost in the overall statistics. See the example of Southside Housing Association (page 46).

By using methods that engage directly with people and draw on the diversity of experience in a collaborative way, greater understanding of different perspectives, needs and expectations is gleaned. Research and consultation that has greater input from service users themselves may have greater credibility amongst the wider group of service users. In this way the validity and 'participatory representativeness' of the research process is enhanced.

Factors which influence the quality of the research such as skills, objectivity and ethical practice arise in participatory research as they do in all approaches to research and consultation. These are discussed in Section 2. The use of researchers who may well be known to the research participants presents issues of potential invasion of privacy and difficulties of disclosure of more sensitive information. On the other hand, familiarity may aid the development of rapport and more honest responses. There is no hard and fast rule and judgements need to be made depending on the topic and the local circumstances. There are strategies that can be used to overcome some of these issues. The well-being and safety of researchers must also be addressed.

How to have more participation

Different levels of participation are commonly described in terms of a ladder which ascends through various stages from tokenism, informing, consultation and involvement to shared decision making and service user control.

Bearing this in mind, it is helpful to think about the desired and practical degree of participation at each stage of the research and consultation process. Service users can be involved at all stages:

- contributing to the design of the service user consultation framework;
- identifying specific topics or issues for research and consultation;
- deciding on appropriate research design and methodology;
- designing data collection tools, such as questionnaires or topic guides;
- data collection/fieldwork;
- data analysis and interpretation;
- reporting findings;
- shaping recommendations for action;
- monitoring implementation of action plans; and
- identifying any further research and consultation needs.

All these typical stages can be undertaken with different degrees of participation. One approach might be to involve service users in data collection through training them to be interviewers or mystery shoppers. Another would allow them to decide the nature of the scope of the research exercise and to decide what questions to ask, even if actual data collection is undertaken by others.

Genuine active engagement in the data analysis stage is often seen as difficult. This may be the case with quantitative methods that produce large amounts of statistical data and require specialist skills to analyse it. However, many such surveys are actually quite modest in terms of the kind of analysis that is warranted and there may well be existing computer and statistical skills within the community, or a willingness to develop them.

Qualitative methods which involve sharing and analysis of stories, visual approaches such as Photovoice and other approaches such as story dialogue lend themselves much more to participation in data analysis and by building validation of the interpretation of the data into the process, so enhance the validity and credibility of the data.

Traditional methods of reporting through written media may also make it difficult to have full participation in this stage of the research process, but there are other ways of presenting information that do lend themselves to greater engagement and creativity and offer an opportunity to bring frequently isolated and excluded groups, such as young people, into the process. This is addressed in the section on reporting and acting on findings.

It is important to be realistic about what can be achieved through a participatory research and consultation strategy and the degree of engagement that service users will want. The point is to ask them. Service users are a diverse group and different approaches will be necessary to engage with different groups amongst them and to make research and consultation as inclusive as possible.

Involving service users in research – Dundee City Council

Dundee City Council and tenants worked together to improve the Council's repairs service. The council manages approximately 17,000 properties. There are over 25 tenants and residents groups and the council funds the Dundee Federation of Tenants' Associations (DFTA).

In 2001, both tenants and housing officers were concerned that the Council's repairs service was performing poorly. Following discussions with DFTA the Council agreed to review the service and that DFTA would be active participants in the review.

DFTA was represented on a working group established to oversee the review and on sub-groups established to examine specific parts of the repairs service. The council provided funds for DFTA to enable them to communicate and get feedback from members and to appoint independent advisers, Tenants Information Service (TIS), who attended group and sub-group meetings to support DFTA representatives.

To find out the views of tenants so that they could be accurately reflected by DFTA representatives, DFTA held three focus groups with tenants who had recently experienced the repairs service and a conference for member organisations and individual tenant members. Tenants were asked to provide their views of services and how they might be improved and to develop assessment criteria for proposals for the repair service.

DFTA were also represented on the Repairs Development Team, a sub-group of the main group with the task of choosing the most appropriate contractual approach for the repairs service. To gather tenants' views, DFTA representatives consulted with TIS, DFTA's executive committee and, on contentious points, with all DFTA's members through a general meeting. A 'partnership approach' was chosen and a partnership board was established on which DFTA is represented.

Following the development of proposals for the new repairs service, the council and DFTA held a conference, for all tenants, to explain the proposals; to gather attending tenants' views on the proposals and for TIS to present an assessment of the proposals and whether they had satisfied the tenants' criteria. The council also advertised the proposals through the local press and agreed with DFTA that TIS written assessment of the proposals should be distributed to registered tenants organisations and tenants' views should be sought.

The proposals were put into place in 2004. The Council thinks that the repairs service has improved and recent telephone and paper based surveys seem to confirm that tenants also believe the service has improved. Further developments are underway and the Council intends to continue working in consultation with tenants and DFTA.

3.1.8 Making research and consultation as inclusive as possible

One of the 10 key principles of quality in research and consultation is that it should be as inclusive as possible. Individuals and groups of service users who are often excluded from research are commonly referred to as 'hard-to-reach'. This may be due to a variety of reasons, for example, their rural location, small number or because they have particular support needs or vulnerabilities. Hard to reach groups are often those that are the most socially excluded or disadvantaged.

Some more vulnerable service users may live in supported housing and whilst not 'hard-to-find', they may be unable to participate as easily in some research and consultation exercises unless specific attention is paid to their needs. Many of those living in general needs housing also have support needs of various kinds to allow them to give their views on services.

Practice point

- Good practice in inclusion in research and consultation for excluded and hard to reach groups will promote the inclusion of all service users in research and consultation.

What excludes people from research and consultation?

Although there are several groups and communities that are frequently regarded as 'hard-to-reach' it is important to remember that not all groups are hard-to-reach in all circumstances. It is the focus of the research and the characteristics of the group that determine whether a group may be 'hard-to-reach'.

At an individual level, people are often excluded from research and consultation because of communication difficulties, language, ability to read, mental or physical health difficulties and so on. However, a common misconception in research is the view that problems encountered when researching hard-to-reach groups are problems inherent to the group. On the contrary, typically, the problem is with the research design and with the relevance of the research to those being researched. In fact, it may well be the service providers that are hard-to-reach. This is related to research fatigue and is relevant to researching all groups.

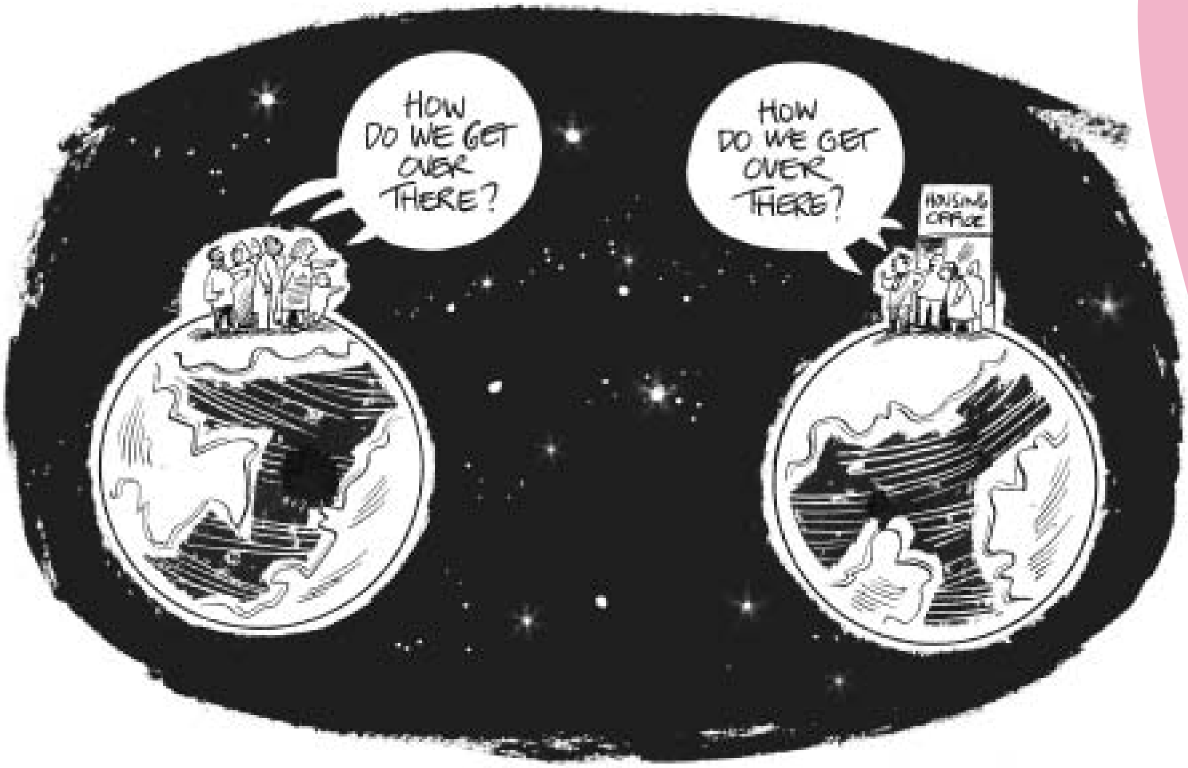
To make research as inclusive as possible and to avoid research fatigue a utilisation-focused approach should be adopted to guide the planning and implemenation of all stages of the research process.

A strategic approach to inclusion

As well as a UFR approach, specific attention needs to be paid to promoting inclusion through action at two levels:

- at a strategic level across social housing organisations to make sure that there is knowledge of different communities of interest amongst service users that may be excluded or hard to reach; and

- at a practical or operational level in the way that particular tools and techniques are adapted to enable the fullest participation in research and consultation.



Strategic level action

Social landlords may need to adopt innovative strategies and provide ways for service users to easily reach the research and consultation to ensure that there are no barriers to access and participation. It will be important to:

- know about and use existing networks and individuals;
- use publicity, events and campaigns to raise awareness of your services and the value placed on service user feedback; and
- actively create new networks and develop contact with national umbrella organisations that work with the key groups.

Fuller guidance on promoting fuller public engagement and reaching hard-to-reach groups is available in the Scottish Parliament Participation Handbook.

Employing staff who are from the communities that providers serve increases confidence and trust amongst service users and helps improve awareness and understanding amongst other staff. There should be links between the organisational equal opportunities or diversity strategy and the framework for service user research and consultation. Staff from all levels can be engaged in service users' research and consultation. This facilitates a greater organisational understanding of research issues and promotes research awareness amongst staff at all levels.

Operational level action

As well as an organisational approach to making research and consultation as accessible as possible, there are also a number of ways in which the choice of method and the way that it is implemented can affect participation.

It may sometimes be more effective to undertake specific research and consultation with excluded groups rather than to 'hope-and-trust' that research across a general population will capture sufficient numbers and details about a particular hard-to-reach population.

Ethical conduct is a particular concern amongst more vulnerable service users. Particular reassurance will need to be given to some service users about their participation in the research and the research design may need to allow and encourage people to have a friend, support worker or advocate with them. It may be necessary to make specific appointment times to conduct interviews with vulnerable groups, particularly if the research includes other parties such as advocates, support workers or interpreters.

It may be helpful to make opportunities for researchers to meet carers, staff and residents beforehand to explain the purpose of the research and consultation and provide a clear statement in an accessible form about the purpose of the exercise, how it will be conducted and by whom. It will also be particularly important to give a clear explanation of the confidentiality and ethical protocols being used and use simple, written consent forms. Informed consent is a particular issue and care must be taken that consent is given by the service users themselves, preferably through written consent forms, and not by others on their behalf.

Researchers need to be aware of and sensitive to the different needs and vulnerabilities of those they are researching. There are some useful lessons in the examples from Dundee, Angus and Perth and Kinross. Whilst it may not be possible to anticipate the variety and extent of needs in advance, some knowledge of the service user group should alert organisations to likely needs and decisions can then be made about the circumstances in which additional support will be provided. For example, it is often particularly important that safe, confidential settings are provided to enable vulnerable groups and those with care and support needs to openly give their views and express their dissatisfaction with services.

It will also be important to make provision for appropriate responses to queries or concerns raised by service users during the research and consultation process.

It is important to be as flexible and as open as possible to using whatever tools and techniques will best gather the information that you require.

Choices about research methods and strategies should be determined by the research context, the characteristics of the group and by the focus of the research. One size does not fit all and it may be necessary to develop different research approaches for different hard-to-reach groups. See the section on choosing an appropriate method.

For some research exercises it may be appropriate and valuable to ask service users about their preferred way to provide information and to offer them the option of an alternative research method or a choice between several methods. For example, with group-based approaches it may be necessary to consider decisions about the composition of the group; members' shared history and proximity in supported accommodation may affect the dynamics of discussion and the quality of the data. The option of an individual interview could be offered.

It may also be important to be prepared to meet preferences about the gender, ethnicity, age and familiarity of an interviewer or focus group moderator. For example, the nature of the research topic or the composition of the group may mean that group members may feel distressed if researchers are too different from themselves. In this respect, it can be helpful to use researchers from the 'hard-to-reach' group, either members of the community or professional researchers with the experience and knowledge of those communities or skilled in overcoming communication difficulties. Whichever method is chosen, it is important to avoid specialised language and jargon or complex instructions that might prevent service users from participating in the research.

Practice point

- For each research exercise it is necessary to take particular care and proceed with sensitivity to the context and likely difficulties that people may face; this informs the research method adopted.

Some conventional research methods, such as satisfaction surveys, may not be appropriate for consulting with excluded groups and individuals. For example, using a very structured questionnaire may be inappropriate with some groups who may have difficulty concentrating or have a preference to tell their stories in their own way. However, in some circumstances it may be that only by using a very structured approach will it be possible for people to give their responses. This is a question of knowing the needs of the group and exercising judgement.

Where groups are small in number, quantitative methods may not yield a sample of sufficient size to gain an understanding of the points-of-view of the population being consulted.

Qualitative techniques, such as in-depth interviews, can often be more accessible and can promote a more relaxed atmosphere as well as enabling more detailed data to be gathered. Participatory methods may also be more suitable. Involving community members as advisers and researchers at some or all stages of the research can be particularly beneficial for research with hard-to-reach groups because:

- community-member researchers are familiar with the setting and are more likely to gain access to others than are external researchers;
- members of community groups may feel more comfortable and confident with someone who is familiar to them; and
- community members' knowledge of their communities enables them to advise on local needs and 'what works best' thus facilitating appropriate research design, implementation and dissemination.

Both qualitative and quantitative methods can be adapted into more visual forms such as Participatory Appraisal that do not rely so heavily on written text. Researchers may need to exercise some creativity in their adaptations but even slight adjustments can make the approach more inclusive.

As with all research and consultation exercises, it is important that service users are informed about how their views have been used to improve services. It is essential that feedback is provided through mechanisms appropriate for the group.

Some of these measures necessary to promote maximum inclusion may bring additional costs; whether it is necessary or feasible to adopt them at all times will require a local decision dependent on the purpose of the exercise, degree of vulnerability of service users and available resources.

Further information and guidance exists elsewhere. For example, the Mental Health Research Network has produced good practice guidance on service user involvement in mental health research. This is likely to be relevant for a wide range of research and consultation exercise, ranging from user-led research through to the involvement of a range of vulnerable service users. The Scottish Association of Black Researchers aims to enable a positive and non-exploitative researching of race, in a way that is inclusive, participatory and empowering and may be able to advise on detailed matters. It has also published an ethical code for researching race, racism and anti-racism in Scotland.

3.1.9 Feedback from service users in rural areas

Organisations working in rural areas or where the numbers of service users are small or dispersed across a wide area may feel that they face particular challenges in gathering service user views.

Part of the problem comes from the over-reliance on quantitative methods which tend to give more weight to the views of the larger number of responses and often overlook the small number of cases or 'outliers' in certain categories. This is a particular issue in rural areas and other areas where there are small sub-groups within a larger population which are seen as 'hard-to-reach'.

Greater use of qualitative and participatory methods will address some of these issues and help organisations to understand the diversity and validity of the particular views of individual and small groups of service users. The need to make research and consultation as inclusive as possible is relevant in both urban and rural areas and is related also to the issue of the ease with which minority views can be overlooked in research or sidelined in analysis and reporting.

There is also a need to make the best use of existing information and contact opportunities to maximum effect by using them to also gather views on service quality. This is as true of organisations in urban as in rural areas. It is likely to be more efficient and to enhance the timeliness and quality of the data collected.

There is no technical fix for organisations working in rural areas. The tools and techniques in this guidance are suitable for use in any context. Some may lend themselves to use over dispersed areas, such as postal surveys, whilst others are suitable for use with small groups and to enhance the depth of knowledge and understanding of particular perspectives.

3.1.10 Sharing ideas and resources amongst landlords

The research for this guidance was partly based on two practice exchange workshops which brought together staff from social landlord organisations to share and discuss their practice dilemmas related to research and consultation. Participants found it beneficial to share experience and to discover that other organisations were struggling with the same issues or indeed, had found a solution that worked for them.

There is scope for more of these kinds of events that provide practical support and guidance from peers and this may be something that the professional bodies such as the Scottish Federation of Housing Associations or the Scottish Housing Best Value Network might consider.

In terms of sharing more specific resources such as questionnaires there may be scope for the development of a resource such as the Question Bank which makes questionnaires used in large scale social surveys conducted by professional survey organisations available on the web. However, blanket adoption of existing data collection instruments obtained in this way may undermine a more utilisation focused approach more suited to the local context. It is important that methods are fit for purpose.

3.1.11 Reporting and acting on findings

One of the 10 key principles of quality in research and consultation is that social landlords should use the findings to improve service delivery and give feedback to those who participate in research and consultation exercises, so that they know that their views have been heard and acted upon. This will help to promote awareness of the purpose and use of research and consultation and may encourage future participation. Planned changes should be monitored and kept under review as part of an ongoing research and consultation strategy.

Priorities for action

Deciding on the priorities for action arising from the findings of research and consultation is linked to the original utilisation focus of the research. Intended users should consider the findings. This may be done in consultation with service users themselves.

A useful framework for identifying action priorities based on research and consultation findings is outlined in Figure 3.2. This process is discussed more fully elsewhere.

Figure 3.2 A framework for action

Action needed now In this situation: Define the scope of proposed actions Indicate timescales Prioritise different actions Identify responsibility for implementation Make monitoring arrangements	**Actions inconclusive or contested** In this situation it may be appropriate to: Monitor situation over time to see if anything changes Look for any other evidence Raise awareness of services available and monitor the situation
No action needed now This may because: Feedback is positive – but ensure there is full understanding what drives quality Service users and/or the organisation have other priorities Action is not urgent and can be delayed No specific actions arise: results provide useful background material	**No action possible now** This may because: Budget constraints Other agencies are responsible; in this case the action should be to bring results to their attention Action can be built into forward planning

Make dissemination a proactive process

Traditional dissemination is often a fairly passive process of publication of written findings. However, dissemination that is linked to learning and action will be a more proactive process that uses the findings as a medium through which to create a dialogue and achieve change. This needs to be built into the design of the dissemination process and choice of media. An active dissemination process might involve making presentations to groups of stakeholders, other agency staff and service users to alert them to issues and to discuss potential solutions. Many qualitative and other more innovative approaches to research and consultation may produce material that can be presented to different audiences with this intention. Examples of this include Photovoice, Participatory Appraisal and Using Stories. South Lanarkshire Council have used the active dissemination of stories from homelessness service users at a conference with partner agencies.

Practice point

- Make dissemination a proactive and creative process that identifies and targets different audiences in ways suited to their need for information and likely interests.

Communicating findings and actions

Findings from research and consultation should be reported to service users, staff, committee members and councillors. Some social landlords may wish to communicate them to the wider public and other audiences.

The type of feedback and how it is provided will vary depending on the nature of the project and the audience and it is likely that most findings will be communicated in some written form, although this need not be a full research report.

Consideration of audience is key. All audiences will appreciate targeted reporting that:

- anticipates their interests;
- provides sufficient information;
- includes details of how to obtain more information if desired;
- is written in an appropriate and accessible way; and
- is available in other formats.

Whilst some audiences appreciate brevity, others may wish to know more detailed information about the basis of the evidence, interpretation and priorities for action. A full technical report is likely to be of most interest to specialist staff and those with an interest in appraising the quality of the research and consultation process itself.

Where service users themselves are the audience the messages need to be short and to the point:

- they should be told what action is proposed;
- when the change will be implemented;
- why the change is happening, that is, what evidence the decision is based on;
- how they can give their comments on the proposed changes; and
- how they can obtain fuller information if they require it.

Many social landlords use newsletters or inserts into regular bulletins to communicate service user feedback. For extensive exercises, it may be worth producing a special edition or a separate report focused on feedback. Different media will be suitable for different audiences. Options for communication of research and consultation findings include:

- research report
- findings or a short summary of the key findings
- executive summaries
- digests/abstracts
- newsletters and inserts into other publications
- web publication
- videos
- DVDs/CD-roms
- posters/exhibitions
- presentations to specific audiences such as staff, council members
- other events – tie-in launch of research
- emailed alerts with hyperlinks to reports on the web
- press releases.

General rules for presentation of findings

The key rule is to match the style to the audience. Figure 3.3 provides some tips for the presentation of written reports, tables, graphics and charts.

Figure 3.3 Tips for the presentation of written reports, tables, graphics and charts.

- Make reports and other written material easy to digest, short and to the point. Ensure they are honest and accurate; don't try to cover up uncomfortable findings. Give a summary of the main points.
- Use Plain English. Avoid unnecessary jargon and polemic.
- Don't put detailed technical information in a main report but make it available, perhaps in an annexe or separate report.
- Keep the presentation simple. Use a swift pace of prose, short paragraphs, simple sentences.
- Check that if you use tables, they are described in the text. Don't expect them to 'speak for themselves'.
- Draw out any qualifying factors or limitations of the data in the text. Discuss the implications for action.
- Ensure that tables are simple and clearly labelled to include the title, source and time period to which the data refers and the area of study.
- In tables, use subheadings, label columns and rows, but do not include too much information. Don't present raw computer output tables as tables in reports.
- Use numbers and percentages to allow comparisons to be made. Don't report percentages where the number of cases is very small; give the absolute figure.
- Use graphics such as bar charts, graphs, pie charts and other diagrammatic representations to make an immediate impression and clarify data.
- Use graphics sparingly to give emphasis to particular findings and to highlight differences and similarities.
- Keep graphics simple and ensure that they do not give an erroneous impression by use of misleading scales. Colour should be used carefully so that there is a good contrast.
- Consider whether pictures, photographs, video clips or cartoons could enrich a research report or presentation and make it more accessible.

3.1.12 Getting your colleagues interested in service user feedback

Some organisations find that research and consultation tends to be seen as the preserve of those staff in 'customer care' related jobs. Others have found that they have involved a range of staff in the in-house design and management of research and consultation exercises. If research and consultation is to be fully used, the task is to engage staff in the findings and actions from research and consultation, whether or not they are actively involved in the collection of the information. Whilst there's no simple solution, part of the answer to generating wider interest and responsibility for getting service user feedback lies in many of the key principles of quality in research which underpin this guidance, in particular using feedback for learning and action, the utilisation focus and using appropriate methods. Active engagement of staff in the process of seeking service users' views and ensuring that staff feedback is valued will also promote a wider awareness of the value and purpose of research and consultation and help to overcome cynicism and research fatigue.

3.1.13 Options for organising and managing research and consultation

Once the strategic framework for service user research and consultation is in place it will be necessary to consider a number of matters relating to the organisation and implementation of the strategy. There are different options for the organisation of research and consultation functions within social landlord organisations which are discussed more fully elsewhere[15].

Whilst there will need to be clear responsibility for the co-ordination and forward planning of research and consultation, this may be part of a centralised research function or part of a post with wider responsibilities and will vary according to the size and resources of different social landlords. A utilisation-focus for research and an emphasis on using feedback for learning and action suggests that interest in and responsibility for research and consultation should be more dispersed throughout the organisation.

Developing a research and consultation programme

It is likely that most organisations will want to develop a research and consultation programme of specific projects planned to be carried out. This should be linked to corporate objectives and be based on ideas from staff at all levels and service users themselves.

However, 'research and consultation' should not be thought of as solely about fairly large, specific projects which may be contracted out. There will need to be a balance between a planned forward programme of specific projects and flexible scope and resources available for small scale opportunities that arise and for making provision to fund research and consultation as part of other activities that are going on anyway. Research and consultation should be built into

[15] Laird, R, & Greaves, K (2000), *Effective Research for RSLs*, Housing Corporation.

existing ways of communicating both with staff and service users. For example, one idea to make the most of contact with groups of service users might be to fund a 'research and consultation hour' or occasional additional time after regular meetings or events to explicitly seek views on service quality.

Undertaking research and consultation in-house

Many research and consultation exercises can be conducted by in-house staff.

Front-line or operational staff can be involved at all stages of the research and consultation process in much the same way as service users themselves. For more on this see the section on using research to promote participation and build capacity. The case for doing so is much the same in terms of building on their unique knowledge and enhancing the credibility and use of the findings.

Not all approaches will require detailed knowledge of research techniques and there are a number of options for providing specialist input where this is necessary. This guidance includes examples where operational staff have undertaken some tasks associated with research and consultation. For example, see the section on service specific, recent contact or exit surveys.

One of the issues of using staff is ensuring that sufficient allowance is made for the time that research and consultation will take and providing appropriate training and support. A frequent concern is that objectivity will be compromised. The relationship between objectivity and quality is discussed more fully in the section on the principle of adopting ethical research practices.

Greater use can also be made of existing contacts between staff and service users and feedback from staff. Greater involvement of staff may also help to get your colleagues interested in service user feedback, help to build ownership of the findings and support learning and action.

The pros and cons of contracting out research and consultation

Research and consultation is often contracted out to external contractors or consultants. Many organisations do not have the time, resources or expertise to undertake the work in-house. Some prefer to commission all or part of the process from external agencies. Staff, service users, councillors and board members may see this as providing independence, greater objectivity and credibility, such as was the case in Moray.

One drawback of contracting out is that the opportunity to develop staff skills and expertise is lost. However, contracts could include an element of skills transfer, training or staff capacity building, so that over time more functions or elements of the research can be managed in-house. Another difficulty is that the distance between the client and the contractor can make it difficult to ensure that the key lessons from the exercise are fully understood, accessible and usable by the client.

Contracting out can offer advantages, particularly for managing relatively short term projects. However, it does require active project management to oversee the process, to monitor and manage the contract to ensure it is undertaken to the agreed timetable and to the required specifications. It is important to ensure that contractors take adequate account of the local context and any specific factors that may impact on the design and conduct of the research, rather than applying off-the-shelf or routinised approaches. This is discussed more fully in the section on the principle of ensuring that methods are fit for purpose.

A utilisation focus to research that 'designs use in' to the research is particularly dependent on a strong and clear understanding of the local context and intended use, which will need to be provided by the client. There is no short cut to user engagement in the research planning process.

An understanding of technical research and consultation processes is also important to appreciate the practical implications and limitations of a range of quantitative and qualitative research methods and how these impact on data quality. It is the failure to appreciate the importance of these factors and the arms-length approach to project management that can undermine the quality of contract research.

Options for commissioning external contractors

Decisions about contracting out are likely to be taken as part of the development of a research and consultation programme.

There are a number of options for contracting out. It may not be necessary to contract out all elements of the programme of research and consultation or indeed, all aspects related to one particular approach, such as a satisfaction survey. It is also possible to commission an external contractor for an agreed number of days per year on a 'call-off' contract. This kind of more flexible arrangement can allow for the provision of informal advice, training, assisting in designing specific projects, aspects of data collection such as focus group facilitation, help in drawing up briefs and commissioning other external contractors as well as carrying out research and consultation exercises.

The cost of letting a contract involves costs to the client organisation and to the prospective contractors. The list of competitors should be based on an initial shortlisting or 'expression of interest' process that allows a reasonable assessment to be made of the real interest and likelihood of contractors submitting a proposal. In this way, the number of competitors can be kept short at the point where detailed formal proposals are to be produced.

Procurement

Each organisation is likely to have its own standing orders or protocols on procurement. EU procurement rules may apply for large contracts.

Research management

More detailed guidance on commissioning and managing social research is available from the Social Research Association[16].

Designing a research and consultation brief

Any research will require a clearly articulated purpose, linked to a project management plan, whether or not it is to be contracted out. A plan for in-house research and consultation will be similar to the headings used in Figure 3.4 which outlines suggested headings for a research and consultation brief where the work is to be contracted out.

[16] www.the-sra.org.uk

Figure 3.4 Suggested outline of a research and consultation brief

The precise structure and content of briefs will depend on the particular circumstances of each project. Fuller guidance is available from the Social Research Association.

Title of project and introduction
Make this clear and concise. Give a brief outline of what the project is about.

Purpose and use
This section should explain the purpose and intended use of the research and consultation exercise. Some background material may be included and any linkages with previous or other exercises made clear.

Aims and objectives
This section should set out the detailed objectives and issues or questions to be explored in the course of the project. These should be SMART: Specific, Measurable and Meaningful, Achievable, Resourced and Timetabled.

Methodology
It is best not to be unduly prescriptive about methods unless there is a very specific requirement such as the need to track change over time and build on previous work, such as Satisfaction Surveys. If you are open to or actively seeking the use of more innovative or participatory methods make this very clear.

Intended users, audience and desired outputs
Indicate who is expected to use the findings of the research and consultation and who else may also have an interest in the findings. Indicate if there are specific requirements for the form in which the research findings are to be presented; this might include written outputs or other media. Where appropriate, specify a requirement for interim outputs to provide an early indication of quality. Any requirements for presentations of findings or participation in seminars should also be stated.

Professional conduct
Ask contractors to specify the Code of Professional Conduct or Research Standards to which they adhere and to identify the specific ethical concerns that the proposed project presents and how they propose to tackle them.

Ensuring research is as inclusive as possible
Ask contractors to indicate how they intend to ensure that the research is as inclusive as possible.

Timetable
This should include the final deadline and any interim milestones for completion of each stage.

Project Management arrangements
Indicate how the project will be managed and whether there will be any kind of advisory or user group.

Budget and other resources available
Protocols will vary amongst different organisations. If possible, it is helpful to provide information about the budget parameters. This might include any in-house resources.

Contractual arrangements
This should indicate if there are any standard terms and conditions.

Information required in proposals
This should outline expectations about what contractors should include in their proposals and include the criteria against which their proposals will be evaluated.

3.1.14 Budgeting for research and consultation

It is difficult to provide any hard and fast rules for estimating the costs of research and consultation. The least resource-intensive form of research is that which makes best use of existing information, existing groups and in-house resources such as using feedback from staff, and using comments, compliments and complaints as feedback. There are a number of tools and techniques in this guidance that facilitate best use of existing resources and staff-service user contacts.

Research and consultation that collects new data is more expensive in time and cost. Figure 3.5 sets out typical research costs for new data collection. In general, qualitative research is likely to be cheaper than large scale quantitative surveys involving use of fieldwork interviewers. In-depth individual interviews are more time consuming than group interviews, but in both cases it is unlikely to be necessary to conduct as large a number of interviews as would be undertaken in a survey. Of the different survey types, postal and short service-specific surveys are likely to be cheaper than face-to-face surveys.

Figure 3.5 Typical research costs for new data collection

- staff/researcher time maybe including advertising and recruitment
- administrative support
- fieldwork costs – this will vary but may include purchase of materials and equipment, cost of telephone calls, incentive payments for participants
- travel and subsistence
- computing time and resources
- training for researchers/fieldworkers
- purchase of any publications
- cost of reporting and dissemination
- VAT may be due

3.1.15 Typical challenges for social landlords

The issues addressed in this guidance focus on many of the typical challenges and concerns that face social landlords of all types in gathering views on service quality. Research for this guidance confirmed that many of these stem from concerns about representativeness, falling response rates and working with a diverse group of service users. Some of our case study organisations provide further insights into these practical concerns and dilemmas.

- Making the most of satisfaction surveys – The Moray Council
- Beyond surveys: using other approaches – Grampian Housing Association
- Using research to promote participation and build capacity – Southside Housing Association
- Researching excluded and hard to reach communities – Dundee City Council, Angus Council and Perth and Kinross Council

Making the most of satisfaction surveys – Moray Council

The Moray Council have over 6,000 houses. Tenant satisfaction surveys have been conducted four times over the last ten years. These surveys are seen as important for the continuous improvement of service provision and as a way of tracking the extent to which the Council has responded to issues raised in previous surveys.

The 2004 survey was commissioned from external consultants. There was no capacity within the current workforce to undertake the exercise and the use of consultants was felt to provide an independent assessment. The 2004 survey was conducted by post and was broadly structured to follow similar lines to the 2001 survey in order to allow direct comparison of results and measure change over time. The response rate was 43% which is good for a postal survey. The questionnaire was 12 pages long and had 32 questions. These included some about the household, tenant views on their homes and the service provided by the Council and more general questions about what they would like to see happen in future. For the first time, the survey was followed up by four focus groups in Buckie, Elgin, Forres and Keith to enable more direct discussion with tenants on specific aspects of service provision. These were useful and allowed the consultants to seek further clarification on responses.

The consultants presented the survey findings to elected members and to tenants at a meeting of registered tenants' organisations. The findings were published in the tenants' newsletter and an action plan prepared. The Council is now in the process of creating a customer feedback policy to enable more comprehensive and systematic consideration of feedback at the point of service delivery.

Levels of satisfaction with housing staff and services had all increased since 2001 and the Council was pleased with the results. Whilst they learnt much from the responses, there were some areas where further information on tenant views would be helpful.

There were some constructive criticisms which have been welcomed as useful feedback in improving service delivery. One of the biggest sources of dissatisfaction was tenants not being kept up to date with information eg during delays in repairs. The Council know there is a case for more frequent communication with tenants and this is being addressed. In the future they will aim to make publications more relevant and interesting for tenants. The Council plan to carry out further surveys every three years.

There are number of lessons to note from using this approach.

- It is important to congratulate staff where results are positive and also to welcome criticisms as important feedback for the improvement of service delivery.
- Avoid being unduly tied to using the same questions from previous years as these may not reflect current concerns and may undermine the usefulness of the findings.
- It is worth flagging up how the survey results have been used by saying to service users 'following the recent satisfaction survey, we have changed...'.
- In terms of the options for managing and commissioning research and consultation, the value of using consultants to provide independence has to be weighed up against the cost of commissioning the work. There may be scope for using the skills of in-house staff on different elements of the work, rather than contracting out the whole survey.
- There is a need to think about how to gather service user feedback on a more regular basis to complement that from occasional satisfaction surveys.

Beyond surveys: using other approaches – Grampian Housing Association

First formed in 1975, Grampian Housing Association now has over 3,000 rented, shared ownership and factored properties spread across Aberdeen, Aberdeenshire and Moray. Grampian has been an active developer of new social housing in the region. It provides housing management services to local agencies providing specialised support and care and it is also involved in a range of Wider Action projects to promote social inclusion. The Association was inspected in December 2004.

Grampian use a number of approaches to gather service user views. Many of these are survey based and face issues of customer apathy which reduces response rates and difficulties getting service users to commit time to giving feedback. The Association is considering what other approaches it can use to address these issues and to ensure that it fully understands the perspectives of all of its customers.

Grampian has a customer participation strategy that provides a framework for the provision of information to Grampian tenants and residents. It also provides a number of opportunities for tenants and residents to give their views on service and strategy development and reviews of policies and practices, both through collective participatory mechanisms and those aimed at individual service users.

A number of surveys to gauge customer opinion have been used. Grampian conduct a postal Customer Satisfaction Survey every five years. The last one was in September 2004 and achieved a response rate of 48%. They also undertake regular, smaller scale surveys using the Customer Panel. Other surveys are conducted about new developments or in response to concerns about certain issues related to service delivery or the wider community. Post-repair surveys are also conducted.

Grampian also gather feedback on services and allocations by housing management staff during visits to new tenants and they have carried out a number of specific comprehensive consultation exercises in recent years, including a review of rent policy. They also hold occasional customer conferences which involve external speakers and Grampian staff as facilitators of workshops and a question and answer session with senior staff and board members.

As well as an annual report, the Association issues a regular newsletter 'Keynote'; this has occasional area specific inserts to reflect the different issues pertinent to different parts of the Association. The 2004 inspection report suggested that service users should be told how performance is improving over time and how the performance of Grampian compares with other Associations; a special performance issue of the newsletter is planned in response.

What else could Grampian do?
Grampian has been giving this some thought. They feel that some of the findings from the recent Satisfaction Survey appear to contradict those from other recent surveys. For example, there seemed to be discrepancies between levels of satisfaction within the same area and between responses to similar questions in the recent Panel survey. This may reflect a need to better understand differing expectations of service provision by different groups of service users. More in-depth, qualitative approaches may be useful here.

Grampian have come to the view that they need to consider ways in which satisfaction can be more immediately, quickly and easily tested after the contact with the customer has taken place. They are piloting a telephone exit survey where a dedicated Customer Service Officer telephones all tenants reporting emergency repairs the day after the repair was reported to ascertain their experience of the service. Grampian is also in the process of reviewing its approach to complaints.

Whilst not prescriptive, this guidance contains a number of other possible approaches that may help to avoid research fatigue and encourage the participation of under represented groups such as young people. For example, adopting a utilisation focus, participatory methods, and making research and consultation as inclusive as possible.

Using research to promote participation and build capacity – Southside Housing Association

Southside Housing Association (SHA) has just over 500 properties in the south side of Glasgow including many in the neighbourhood of East Pollokshields which has the largest black and minority ethnic population in Scotland. Over 30% of the association's tenants are from black and minority ethnic communities. East Pollokshields as an area has significant evidence of social and economic deprivation. It has no special area status and it sits between two large Social Inclusion Partnerships (SIPs) that do attract additional investment.

Staff at SHA were frustrated at the lack of investment and the lack of services and amenities in the area despite evidence of pressing need. This was shared by other professionals working in the area. However, the local population lacked a cohesive community voice.

The response

Working together with social work staff from a local project, staff decided to carry out a Community Profile to raise awareness of the reality of life in East Pollokshields, develop a list of aspirations from the community of the types of changes they would like to see and develop a cohesive and effective community voice. The original thinking was that this would be a quantitative piece of work that would provide the kind of evidence of need produced by the SIPs. What happened in practice is a good example of using research to promote participation and build capacity.

During the process of community consultation the nature of the assignment changed. A group of 15–20 residents and agency representatives came together to oversee the process. The group revised the original brief so that the Profile would be more appreciative and focus on the positives of the neighbourhood as well as the negatives.

A small steering group of residents was formed to interview prospective consultants to undertake the work, with support from the SHA Community Development Officer. Consultants were appointed whose approach focused on a mixture of desk based research, community consultation events, focus groups and agency interviews.

The first stage of the work was a desk based analysis of existing data sources which provided a detailed socio-economic profile of the neighbourhood. This was followed by two consultation sessions with the community. Interviews were also conducted with all statutory and voluntary sector organisations working in the area and a number of focus groups held to explore key issues such as housing, the environment, older people and youth issues.

This work was written up in a report which was considered over a number of sessions by the larger group of residents and agency representatives. In addition the consultants worked with this group to consider community structures, future roles and direction. A final report incorporating priorities for action into a formal action plan was presented to a public meeting involving the local authority and other agencies and posted to every household in the area.

This process is still ongoing. However, there have been a number of improvements in joint working between agencies in the area and better relationships with funders. There is now a new community representative structure that is gaining in confidence and credibility and an action plan that reflects community aspirations. A number of the action points have been implemented including a new CCTV scheme to meet community safety concerns.

Researching excluded and hard to reach communities – Dundee City Council, Angus Council and Perth and Kinross Council

To help develop Local Housing Strategies, Dundee City Council and Angus Council commissioned research on the housing needs and aspirations of both black and minority ethnic (BME) communities and Gypsies/Travellers in Tayside during 2004. Perth & Kinross Council was also a partner in the Gypsies/Travellers research.

Whilst both pieces of research were of interest to community planning partners and important to the development of local authority Local Housing Strategies, the experience of conducting this research does illustrate a number of challenges and pitfalls that are present when engaging communities and service users in research and consultation. Both studies were conducted by contractors from universities.

Excluded or hard to reach communities may not share the concerns or the priorities of the organisations seeking to undertake the research and such research will need to proceed with care and attention to ensure that the research is of high quality, that it provides valid and useful data and that it engages with the communities with which it is concerned.

Researching black and minority ethnic communities in Dundee and Angus
The 2001 Census showed that the BME population in Dundee is some 3.7% of the total population and in Angus it is only 0.8%. However, the BME population in both areas is growing and little is known about the housing needs and aspirations of the different BME communities.

Research was undertaken to investigate housing needs amongst black and minority ethnic communities. It involved interviews with community groups, a household survey, a community workshop and analysis of the Census data from 1991 and 2001.

The experience illustrated some key issues for achieving meaningful research and consultation with community groups.

- Approaches taken in relation to different community groups should be flexible.
- Verbal communications work more effectively than other forms of communication.
- Written communications should be translated into the appropriate community language rather than be written in English with the offer of translation.
- Using existing groups and networks is very valuable but don't assume that approaching the group or network means that the whole community has been 'reached'. Not everyone in the population will be a member of a community group and don't assume that community leaders will be able to pass on information to all members of the community.
- Visiting groups may not be appropriate or effective in some circumstances and not all groups meet regularly.
- Informal 'chats' work effectively and can often be used instead of other more formal methods of gathering information.
- Consultation and feedback is more effective when it is 'decentralised' and informal. Don't assume that community members expect or will feel comfortable in the same events or settings as the researchers. For example, very few community members turned up for the formal feedback session at the end of the research.

Researching the housing needs and aspirations of Gypsies/Travellers in Tayside.

This research also examined housing needs amongst Gypsies/Travellers communities. Information was gathered by conducting interviews with professionals working with Gypsies/Travellers, face-to-face interviews with Gypsies/Travellers living on sites and in housing in Tayside and using existing data and contacts held by local authorities.

A leaflet providing information on the research was distributed to the three local authority Gypsy/Traveller sites in Tayside and to a private site in Angus. Contact was also established with voluntary agencies working with settled Gypsies/Travellers. Regular liaison meetings were also used and the councils tried to contact people directly. A £10 incentive voucher was used to encourage Gypsy/Travellers to take part in the research.

Some key lessons emerged from the research and consultation process.

- Establishing good relationships and links and making contact via word-of-mouth is essential when working with Gypsies/Travellers.
- Developing a study should be done in consultation with Gypsies/Travellers. Gypsies/Travellers should be represented on local liaison groups, research advisory groups and project working parties.
- If consultation is to be undertaken with Gypsies/Travellers staying on unofficial sites then the time of year that the research takes place should be considered. Research should be undertaken during summer and winter months to ensure that people are included in the research even if they are travelling and to include people staying on sites and in houses.
- Sufficient time needs to be given to conduct the research in order to develop good local information, contacts and relationships with Gypsies/Travellers groups.

More about both these pieces of research can be found at: www.communitiesscotland.gov.uk

3.2 Different approaches

3.2.1 How to choose an appropriate method

The choice of appropriate methods is linked to the purpose and use of the research and consultation. There is no best research method. Methods of data collection should be selected on the basis of whether they are 'fit for purpose'. That is, they should be chosen because they are the most appropriate method for gathering the type of information that is required. This is discussed more fully in Section 2.

Choosing a research method or methods is generally determined by the research problem or question, from whom information is sought, under what circumstances the information is sought and the type of information that is required (quantitative or qualitative). In practice, choice may be constrained by the availability of resources; see the section on budgeting for research and consultation. Ethical considerations and concerns about making research and consultation as inclusive as possible may also hinder the use of some methods.

It is essential that researchers and commissioners of research and consultation are familiar with a wide range of methods to ensure that appropriate alternatives can be selected in cases where the most appropriate choice is impractical. This guidance provides detailed coverage of a wide range of techniques and tools that social landlords may use for gathering feedback from service users.

3.2.2 Action research: is it relevant?

Action research aims to develop practical knowledge by undertaking research with and by people, rather than on them. Rather than being a passive audience for research and consultation, service users and research users would become active co-researchers[17].

Action research is not itself a research method. It is an approach to inquiry, or a collaborative process of asking questions, analysis of the responses, testing out new actions on the basis of those responses and asking further questions. In this way, the research process tests out ideas as they are developed and provides 'real-time' feedback about what's working and how. This produces practical knowledge rooted in the experience and practice of those most closely involved.

One of the purposes of action research is to look at what really happens in public service delivery, rather than what's supposed to happen. This may be about highlighting hidden assumptions about services or service users in order to see where improvements can be made. It tackles the challenges of changing behaviour on the basis of evidence and uses the tacit and local knowledge of those working to deliver services and those that use those services. It helps to promote fresh ways of thinking about local problems and so produces more appropriate and meaningful 'answers'. In this way, action research will promote a utilisation focus to research and consultation.

[17] *For fuller account see Brief Notes on the Theory and Practice of Action Research*, Reason, P and McArdle, K L in *Understanding Research Methods for Social Policy and Practice*. Saul Becker and Alan Bryman (eds) Bristol: The Polity Press. (2004) also at www.bath.ac.uk

An action research approach to views on the quality of services could be organised in a number of ways. It is likely to be participatory – to involve service users themselves, staff at all levels and others with an interest in the way that services are organised and delivered. It is also likely to be appreciative; focusing on the aspects of the service that are valued in order to build on them and to generate momentum for change. The scope of the inquiry is unlikely to be tightly defined in advance, but open to the issues and concerns that emerge and are of most concern to those involved. The emphasis is likely to be on developing a dialogue about service quality and on staying closely attuned to what matters in the local context.

Action research may use a variety of methods, both qualitative and quantitative. The choice of techniques will depend on the purpose of the inquiry and should be chosen by those who are part of that process. A number of different methods are likely to be used. Qualitative techniques are particularly relevant including in-depth interviews and participant observation.

The participatory techniques could all be used in some way, for example system mapping involving all those involved in aspects of service delivery processes and service users themselves. Using stories in some way is an important approach, particularly where the analysis of the stories and decisions about the lessons to be drawn from them are made collaboratively as in storydialogue. Significant event analysis could be used as a way of involving staff and service users in sharing stories for service improvement. By engaging staff, research users and service users in the research and consultation process, action research promotes the ownership and implementation of the findings.

3.2.3 Using feedback from staff

The primary focus of this guidance is on service users' views. However, it will be valuable for all organisations to consider how to make more systematic use of existing contacts between staff and service users and feedback from staff. Of course, the views of staff are important because they will be expected to implement any changes to service delivery, but they are also an important and underused source of intelligence about day to day service delivery and customer attitudes. The most common form of research amongst staff is some kind of staff satisfaction survey which looks at their perceptions of the organisation and the customer. Such surveys share the limitations and drawbacks of all surveys.

Practice point

- Staff are an underused resource in reviewing the quality of services. There is scope for more active and creative approaches to gathering staff feedback that go beyond occasional staff surveys.

The use of existing staff-service users contacts is likely to be relatively simple and less resource intensive than many other approaches to research and consultation. This may mean more systematic recording, analysis and discussion of contacts between front-line staff and service users and feeding this into decision making. An action research approach to service quality would seek to engage with both service users and staff. There may be scope for joint training provision.

Research amongst staff, particularly where they are able to share stories about their work, may highlight critical incidents or significant events that illustrate what it is about the service that works well or particular difficulties that they face.

There are a number of key issues in relation to using staff feedback in this way.

- The purpose and use of staff feedback should be conveyed to staff. Clear demonstration of its use will be important to encourage this process.

- Approaches that are used should complement other methods that engage directly with service users.

- A range of approaches to gathering the views and experience of staff should be used and all staff should have a chance to participate in some way and have an opportunity to validate the conclusions.

- There may be scope for joint staff and service user research, consultation or training.

- The implications of the feedback for service delivery should be identified, reported to all key audiences and acted on.

- It is important to identify any further research and consultative needs.

3.2.4 Being appreciative – finding out what's working well and why

Linked to the idea of a utilisation focus to research and consultation is the idea that it is important to know as much about what is working well as about things that are more of a problem. Knowing what it is that has driven high satisfaction levels will provide a useful signal to continue providing the service in that way. Yet, it is common to accept good 'headline' satisfaction ratings at face value and not to go beyond using them to provide a kind of 'corporate pat on the back'. This has its place, but it will be far more useful to know what's behind it. It will help to understand expectations and to make the findings more practical and useful.

Adopting a more positive, appreciative approach may go beyond asking what's working well and why. The way questions are asked is very important to setting the tone and direction of responses. Constructive questions move conversations forward and help to identify experience that can be drawn on to make change. Questions which contain negative assumptions, say, for example, that there is nothing good about living in the area, will almost certainly elicit a catalogue of problems and complaints. A different strategy, which starts with a question based on a positive assumption (that there is likely to be something positive about living in the area), will more than likely bring valued qualities to the fore. These may well then be followed by a similar catalogue of problems, but starting positively does make a difference.

This kind of 'appreciative inquiry' approach is based on the idea that in any situation, however awful or difficult, there is something that works, at least some of the time. Appreciative inquiry works on the basis that it is important to discover what that is in order to build on it. This does not mean ignoring the negative things, but starting on a positive, appreciative note sets the tone and opens up potential for change.

Appreciative inquiry is not a separate method, but is an approach that can be incorporated into almost any other method. The inclusion of 'compliments' into complaints systems is one idea that builds on this; this may not elicit a barrage of good will, but at least signals that you also want to hear about what is working well.

There is also a link with asset-based community development and ideas about social capital relevant to the Wider Role and community regeneration work of social housing organisations. These are based on recognition of what skills, capacities and resources already exist in a community or organisation. Appreciative inquiry is a good starting point to finding out what these are and there is more information about this approach elsewhere[18,19].

3.2.5 Using information and communication technologies (ICT) to gather service user feedback

There is growing use of ICT in the social housing sector. Most ICT initiatives are concerned with improving service delivery. There is some use of ICT to promote tenant participation and limited use for the purposes of gathering service user feedback. Landlords have, for example, provided service users with Internet access via computers to enable their use of email, websites, discussion forums, bulletin boards, chatrooms and other web-based activities.

Whilst this situation is likely to evolve over time, effective and successful use of ICT to gather feedback from service users is unlikely to be a clear-cut task. This is due to two principal reasons.

- Access to the web and email is still relatively limited amongst social housing residents. The scope may vary depending on the service user profile and is likely to change over time.
- Many research and consultation methods do not lend themselves to use online.

Although web access may be limited ICT offers scope for reaching hard-to-reach groups, for example the use of text messaging with young people. With permission, this might be useful as a reminder to pay rent, to attend an appointment or respond to a postal survey, but it is unlikely to be an appropriate medium to gather user views in its own right. There may be scope to use ICT as a

[18] http://appreciativeinquiry.cwru.edu/

[19] Learning Point 2: *Appreciative inquiry: asking the right questions*, Scottish Centre for Regeneration , February 2005

way of administering surveys or receiving complaints. Online customer feedback forms can be used to gather feedback from service users, but to use this data appropriately a rigorous administrative system is needed to ensure that multiple online responses by the same person are detected and that online responses and paper-based responses are not double counted.

Research fatigue leading to low response rates to paper-based satisfaction surveys and other data gathering techniques is unlikely to be countered by attempts to gather data online. Many of the inherent difficulties of questionnaire based research such as the use of structured questions and the inability to control who exactly completes the questionnaire are not addressed by the use of ICT. Some service users, particularly those with little experience of using computers, may feel that responding to an online questionnaire is too difficult or time consuming or may be concerned about data protection and confidentiality. Some people may simply have a preference not to use ICT at all.

Online surveys have the appeal of administrative convenience, but it is difficult to control the sample selection and they are likely to of very limited use with probability samples.

Some qualitative techniques, such as in-depth interviews and focus groups, do not easily lend themselves to administration in this way.

It is likely to be worthwhile for a social housing organisation to know about access to the web and email amongst its service users and to consult on attitudes to its use in service delivery and gathering service users' feedback.

Practice point

- Ask service users how they wish to be consulted and whether they are happy to respond to web based or other methods that use ICT.

Use of the web - Grampian Housing Association

Grampian HA sees its website (www.grampianhousing.co.uk) as a means of communicating with customers. The most recent customer satisfaction survey found that 28% of tenants and 60% of shared owners had access to the internet, mostly at home. However, there are very low levels of usage of the site by customers; only 6% had visited the website, 4% had corresponded with Grampian by email and 2% had corresponded through the website. The survey does show that there is higher interest in corresponding by email or through the website in the future and Grampian would like to develop better two-way communication through the website. The website address and the services offered through the site such as reporting repairs, requesting housing application forms and downloading publications are regularly publicised.

3.3 Quality issues

3.3.1 Skills for interviewing

Interviews may be undertaken in both qualitative and quantitative approaches to research and consultation. The skills of the interviewer are a crucial influence on the quality of the data collected.

The role of the interviewer is to explain the purpose of the interview, conduct the interview using the questionnaire schedule or topic guide, record the data appropriately and complete the interview process ensuring that interviewees are content with the way it has been conducted.

Ensuring quality means that the interviewer must be highly skilled and experienced at managing the entire interview process. This includes being able to make appropriate judgements about adapting and amending the interview as it proceeds and handling any interruptions to the smooth flow of the interview that may arise.

Training is an important issue. Interviewing is a skilled task and for research to be good quality, interviewers need to be well-trained and experienced. There are a number of social and market research industry quality standards that include selection, training and conduct of survey research interviewers in the field. See the section on planning for high quality surveys. It is not possible to produce full guidance for training here but there are a number of key issues that training for interviewers should cover.

Building rapport and managing the interview

The interviewer must establish a suitable rapport with the interviewee, explain the purpose of research and why interviewee was chosen, explain anonymity and confidentiality and seek permission to make notes or tape record the interview. Many survey interviews are conducted using lap top computers so their use will need to be explained to the interviewee.

In in-depth interviews, the interviewer needs to pay close attention to what the interviewee is saying and have the ability to adapt the interview as new information emerges.

It will be important to end the interview appropriately by offering opportunities for further comments, the chance to ask any questions about the research and to reiterate assurances of anonymity and confidentiality. It may also be appropriate to signpost interviewees to any relevant further information or sources of advice about issues they may have raised in the interview.

Being aware of the effects of the interviewer

How interviewees perceive the interviewer can have both a positive and negative effect on the type and quantity of information that the interviewee offers. This is called 'the interviewer effect'. The main issues include:

- personal attributes of interviewer: these include age, sex, ethnic origin, perceived social status and professional status. Shared attributes may ease the interview process or hinder it. It is important to consider this in deciding who should conduct interviews;

- presentation of the interviewer: it is important to put interviewees at ease and part of doing this is to ensure that the interviewer's outward appearance and personal demeanour is pleasant. Interviewers should dress to fit the context or wear something conventional or neutral and should remain courteous and non-judgemental at all times; and

- personal involvement of the interviewer: sharing some personal information with interviewees helps to put them at their ease, but it is important that the interviewer is happy about what they share and that they do not appear to contradict, judge or patronise the interviewee.

Obtaining full responses

One of the tasks of the interviewer in an in-depth interview, and when using open ended questions in a semi-structured questionnaire, is to judge when it is appropriate to probe the responses given to get a fuller answer.

Figure 3.6 illustrates how important it is for an interviewer to go beyond the initial, perhaps superficial, responses without influencing the responses given in their use of probes or prompts.

Figure 3.6 Example of the use of probes by an interviewer

Interviewer question:	'From your point of view what are the best things about living in this neighbourhood?'
Interviewee answer 1:	'In the last neighbourhood we lived in people didn't care about keeping up the neighbourhood.'
Suggested interviewer probe:	Because the answer isn't about this neighbourhood, the interviewer could simply repeat the question, with the stress on this.
Interviewee answer 2:	'The people.'
Suggested interviewer probe:	This doesn't really tell you anything very much, so interviewer could probe by saying…'Tell me more about that.'
Interviewee answer 3:	'The people are good neighbours.'
Suggested interviewer probe:	It is important to check out what this means to the respondent, rather than assuming the interviewer knows… so the interviewer could ask…'How do you mean 'good neighbours'?.'
Interviewee answer 4:	'They keep themselves to themselves. They leave you alone. You don't have to worry about being sociable and you don't have to worry about what they think'.
Suggested interviewer probe:	This is a fairly full answer now, if perhaps surprising. So the interviewer could say 'OK, I have that down' and check that is the full answer…'is there anything else?'
Interviewee answer 5:	'No'.

The importance of the interview location

Where an interview takes place can affect the quality and quantity of information that the interviewee is prepared to give and can affect the performance and safety of the interviewer. Ideally, an interview setting should offer the following:

- a safe location
- appropriate access
- privacy
- freedom from noise and interruptions
- comfortable seating appropriately arranged
- reasonable acoustics
- appropriate lighting and room temperature.

Recording data in interview settings

Face to face surveys are usually administered by the use of CAPI (Computer Assisted Personal Interviewing). The interviewer is routed through the questionnaire by reading the questions from the computer screen and keying in respondents' answers accordingly.

In in-depth interviews keeping track of what is said is most usually done through a combination of taking notes and audio tape recording and sometimes, when arranged in advance, video recordings can be done.

Deciding on how to keep a record of information may need to be negotiated on an interview-by-interview basis with the interviewee either prior to the interview or at the outset of the interview. The point is to ensure that the interviewee is comfortable and permits the use of the recording method and that the researcher's proficiency in the use of the method enables detailed information to be recorded.

If an interview is tape-recorded it should be transcribed as soon as possible, preferably by the interviewer. Transcription can take a long time and it is important to use high quality tapes and recording equipment so that the interview can be clearly heard when played back.

3.3.2 Ethical practice in research

What is ethical research practice?

Ethical research practice refers to values and rules of conduct in research and consultation. Many professions and organisations that engage in research have developed codes of ethics or sets of ethical principles. Today's increasing focus on corporate responsibilities and changing legislation on Human Rights, Freedom of Information and Data Protection continue to bring ethical considerations in the practice of research and consultation much more to the fore.

There is no research governance framework within the social housing sector in Scotland. Although the regulatory framework considers the quality and robustness of approaches used to gather service users' views, the inspection process largely focuses on the use of the feedback rather than the process of gathering it. However, useful codes of ethics for researchers engaged in social housing research can be obtained from:

- Social Research Association (SRA), Ethical Guidelines;
- British Sociological Association (BSA), Statement of Ethical Practice for the British Sociological Association; and
- United Kingdom Evaluation Society (UKES), Guidelines for Good Practice in Evaluation.

There is ongoing debate in social research about what is and what is not ethically acceptable and it is important that researchers are aware of and are sensitive to areas and issues of possible ethical concern.

Ethical research practice and quality

There is a link between ethical research practice and quality. Research and consultation that has been conducted without due attention to ethical practice is unlikely to be of a high quality. Given inevitable constraints on resources and time, it may seem expedient to cut corners and perhaps disregard protocols designed to safeguard participants. Often a research commissioner may be unaware that this is happening. However, it is likely to undermine the quality of the data, affect the credibility of the findings and may jeopardise any future research and consultation exercises. See the section on the criteria for assessing the quality of research and consultation.

Practice point

- It will be important to establish required ethical standards and to monitor their implementation, particularly within a contracting environment, without imposing an undue burden on in-house staff or contractors themselves.

Main areas of ethical concern

The main areas of ethical concern are presented below and there is some overlap between them. Consulting codes of conduct is a useful way to obtain greater detail on these issues and to develop awareness of other possible ethical concerns.

Is the research objective and competent?

Research design, implementation and dissemination should not be biased or misleading. The research design should allow for both positive and negative findings and methods of data collection should be appropriate for the research question and the type of data (quantitative or qualitative) that is sought. Researchers should be unbiased in their treatment of research participants, in administering their data collection and in reporting findings.

Will the research cause harm to participants?

Harm or risk to participants may include anxiety and stress; loss of self-esteem; detrimental effects on development; physical harm and persuading participants to take part in reprehensible activities. A general rule of thumb is that research can be regarded as likely to cause harm or risk if it entails participants' experiencing more harm or risk than they would encounter in everyday life.

Although it is not possible to identify or anticipate the likelihood of harm in all circumstances, researchers should consider the possibility carefully and take steps to minimise it. This includes thinking about harm that may be caused if participants are identified or are identifiable.

Researchers need to ensure that information and records about individual participants are kept confidential and the identity of individuals remains anonymous. It is particularly important that in published materials individuals are not identified nor can they be identified by references to, for example, a town or an event, unless they give their consent to this. It is quite acceptable to change the names of people and places to maintain anonymity.

Is it necessary to obtain informed consent from research participants?

Informed consent refers to researchers providing potential participants with as much information as possible about the proposed research and its possible implications so that they can make an informed decision about whether or not they want to participate.

Researchers should not withhold information that might affect potential participants' willingness to take part in the research. Potential participants should be made aware that they are under no obligation to participate and that they can withdraw information or themselves from the research at any stage.

Seeking the informed consent of potential participants is standard courtesy in research but there are some circumstances in which seeking informed consent is difficult. For example, the unstructured and evolving nature of much qualitative research may mean that researchers are not in a position to give detailed information to potential participants in advance and if the research involves contact with many people, it may not be practicable to gain informed consent from everyone. The general rule of thumb referred to above can be applied again here; if the research is likely to cause more harm or risk to participants than they would encounter in everyday life, then informed consent should be secured.

Will the research invade participants' privacy?

Giving consent to be involved in a piece of research does not mean that participants have surrendered all rights to privacy. Even if a participant has given their consent they may feel that some research questions are an invasion of their privacy and they may not want to answer. This situation should be acknowledged and respected by researchers. Privacy issues also relate to issues of anonymity and confidentiality. To reiterate the points made earlier, it is important that personal information relating to participants is kept confidential (in fact, it may be more appropriate not to record highly sensitive information at all), and it is important that the identity of participants is protected and anonymised.

Does the research involve deceiving participants?

This really all depends on what is meant by deception. In some cases, it may not be possible for a researcher to know all the details of a research approach in advance. Participants should be given accurate information about what is known in advance and procedures adopted for ensuring continuing consent as the process evolves. This is about acting in good faith on the basis of what is known at the time and always having regard for the wellbeing of the research participants.

Deliberate deception of participants is ethically objectionable but it can be extremely difficult to know where the boundaries lie between ethical and unethical practices. These difficulties are widely recognised and although guidance in codes of ethics is useful it often leaves room for interpretation. It is helpful to consult several codes of ethics if coming to a decision over a possible issue of deception is presenting a problem.

3.3.3 Freedom of Information and Data Protection

The Freedom of Information Act 2000 and Data Protection Act 1998 have implications for research and consultation activities of social landlords relating to the use and disclosure of personal data.

The Data Protection Act 1998 came into force on March 1 2000. The Act requires that all personal data (information which relates to identifiable persons) which is automatically processed must be officially registered. This requirement covers personal data stored or processed for research purposes by both the organisation and any contractors. Further information is available from the UK body responsible for enforcement of the Act, the Office of the Information Commissioner.

The Freedom of Information (Scotland) Act 2002 introduces important new rights to access information held by public authorities and will require more proactive publication of information. Further information is available from the Scottish Executive.

The Local Government Association provide up to date briefings on the implementation of freedom of information, although attention will need to be paid to detail of the law as it is applies in Scotland.

In relation to aspects of Freedom of Information that are particularly relevant to research and consultation, it is likely that public authorities will be asked for information about procurement processes and may receive requests for the release of additional data such as transcripts of interviews or other data not included in published reports; such data will need to be anonymised. As the agents of public authorities, any external contractors will need to be able to respond to requests to provide such data. There is no published guidance available yet on these issues but fuller discussion and information are available from the Consultation Institute.

Section 4

Techniques and tools

4.1 Using existing information

There is great scope to make better use of information that already exists (that may have been collected for other purposes) before embarking on the collection of new information. Whilst there may be concerns that information can soon become out of date or may not relate directly to the purpose of the research and consultation exercise, information collected for monitoring purposes is not always analysed as fully as it could be.

4.1.1 Know what is already known

When considering research and consultation on any issue it is important to first consider what is already known, before designing new data collection procedures. This is linked to the need to take a planned, strategic approach to research and consultation. Such a strategy would review the availability and use of existing information and identify gaps in knowledge which new research is needed to fill.

Small changes to the way that existing data systems work may well yield more useful data for service improvement.

4.1.2 Measure what matters

It's common to measure the aspects of work processes that are easiest to measure, usually those things that can be counted. The measures used tend to define what is meaningful rather than the larger purpose of the work defining which measures are used. Performance measurement systems tend to focus on outputs. Many measures rarely provide much useful information about critical capacities and behaviours that influence service quality outcomes, such as commitment, learning, teamwork, quality and innovation.

Practice point

- It's worth undertaking a review of routine data collection to see whether it actually measures the kind of things that can inform an assessment of service quality. This may be one of the reasons why the data is not used as fully as it might be.

To meet the challenges of continuous improvement, social landlords need to go beyond measurement systems that focus on outputs and find ways to ways to measure outcomes that are less easily defined and operationalised than, say, lettings, rent collection and maintenance.

4.1.3 Use existing information on service standards in a consultative way

There are a range of performance management tools that will help organisations to develop appropriate measures. Most landlords do report performance information against key targets in their annual reports; however, few go beyond this rather limited approach.

Qualitative aspects of work are best defined and used through a participatory process involving staff and service users, so that they identify what is important to track and which measures are critical to success. Management information systems designed in this way are more likely to provide useful feedback which provides critical information in real time, is more open to new and surprising information and which can adapt to changing circumstances.

If the appropriate information about performance against standards is available there is likely to be scope to use this information in a deliberately consultative and more proactive way in order to seek questioning and challenge from service users.

Using existing information: checklist

√ Consider what information is collected on a routine basis that might contribute to a better understanding of service quality issues.

√ Consider whether small changes to the way that administrative and management data is collected could make it more useful for the assessment of service quality.

√ Appraise the limitations of existing information to develop an understanding of where the gaps in knowledge are.

√ Undertake a review of routine data collection to assess how far it serves quality assessment and continuous improvement.

√ Be prepared to change what is measured to reflect changing circumstances and priorities.

√ Involve staff and service users in a review and in defining any new measures.

√ Use existing information in a more deliberately consultative and proactive way.

√ When collecting new data make sure you know in advance how all new data is to be used and by whom, that is, 'design use in'.

Alternative and related approaches

- Significant event analysis
- Using staff
- Assessing satisfaction and expectations

4.2 Quantitative methods

Quantitative methods include a range of approaches including surveys. These approaches use highly structured techniques of data collection that allow for quantification, hypothesis testing, statistical analysis and the ability to generalise from the data. This guidance is largely confined to various types of survey and sampling techniques.

One of the criticisms of quantitative techniques is that in attempting to measure and compare attitudes and behaviours much of the depth of understanding and meaning is lost. Survey questionnaires are a widely used tool and whilst they allow for relatively simple administration of some form of feedback, they often fail to address the issues of concern or support the development of a real understanding of the diversity of experience. They rely on the ability to articulate or write responses to questions in the way that they are presented within the survey.

Quantitative methods are useful where statistical representativeness and the ability to generalise to a larger population is a goal of the research or consultation. They offer the ability to gather views on service quality from across a large number of respondents, to compare views within groups of a larger population and track change over time. In practice they are often combined with qualitative methods.

Practice point

- There is scope to greatly improve the quality and usefulness of quantitative methods, particularly surveys undertaken by social landlords.

This guidance encourages social landlords to make fuller complementary use of qualitative approaches, to plan and design useful surveys and to pay closer attention to the quality and presentation of research and consultation.

4.2.1 General satisfaction surveys and opinion polls

A survey is a systematic gathering of data that uses a questionnaire to gather the same information from each individual service user usually based on a sample drawn from a wider population which may be all tenants, residents or service users or a smaller sub-group. General surveys are useful to get a broad picture of the views of service users on a range of issues.

General tenant satisfaction surveys or opinion polls that take place every three to five years are the most common method used to assess the views of service users, particularly amongst local authorities and larger housing associations. The measurement of satisfaction brings a number of conceptual and practical difficulties.

Satisfaction surveys are often done largely to meet perceived regulatory expectations. Whilst this doesn't necessarily mean that the data is not useful, the focus may be less on ensuring surveys provide practical, useful local information than on meeting requirements. Often surveys are an attempt to assess general satisfaction, to measure change over time and to build an up-to-date profile of the client base. It will not usually be necessary to conduct a major survey of all tenants or residents every year unless there has been a substantial change to key aspects of service delivery.

Practice point

- Landlords need to take a more strategic approach to the use of general satisfaction surveys. It should be clear how any general satisfaction survey complements other, more regular approaches to consultation.

4.2.2 Planning and designing useful surveys

A key principle of quality in research and consultation is that the research design must be led by purpose and use. It is essential that the purposes of the research and how the findings will be used are clear. This section addresses the elements of a utilisation-focus to the planning and design of surveys.

Think about the purpose of the survey

It is important to be clear about the purpose of any general survey. Undertaking a survey may raise expectations for change that can't be met either because the information asked for is not precise or clear enough to be actionable or because resources or other factors are not in place to support change. It is important to be clear about what can be changed and to be frank with service users about what they can expect to see happen as a result of any survey. Satisfaction surveys should not be undertaken simply to elicit general approval ratings that do not provide actionable information or for PR purposes.

Practice point

- Surveys should have a clear purpose and focus on the usefulness of the data rather than being done to elicit general approval ratings. The uses to which the data will be put and by whom should be able to be specified in advance.

Ask the right questions of the right people

Different terminology is used by social landlords to refer to people in relation to housing. These terms of reference include tenants, residents, owners, shared owners, customers, service users. It is important to be clear about who should be answering the questions. This may be very strictly defined for example, the legal tenant, or may be more flexible, such as any adult living in the property. Exactly what is meant by whatever term is used should be clearly defined. The working definition used may miss out an important section of the community of research interest so, for example, a focus on tenants will not include the views of young people and others in the community who are not legal tenants.

It also important to define the research population to make sure you ask for information based on recent experience. If the focus of the survey is assessing general satisfaction and views, then a sample based on the whole target population will be appropriate, such as all tenants or residents. If the survey is asking about specific services, then it will be important to ensure that you target actual service users. If it is attempting to do both, those who do not have recent experience of using a particular service should not be asked questions about it. More guidance is available in the section on sampling.

Consider whether change over time is important

Surveys may produce baseline data to allow monitoring over time and comparison with other organisations or to allow benchmarking. If this is the intention, standardised question wording should be used. Landlords may feel tied to using previous questions even though many things may have changed so it’s worth considering very carefully how necessary this is.

Keep it short

Questionnaire length, the way the questionnaire is administered and the way questions are worded all affect the quality of the data. As a general rule, ask as few questions as possible and only ask questions that are necessary.

Simulate how the data will be used

Before data is collected, it’s useful to simulate how the data will be used. This can be done with fabricated findings – in other words, with the kind of findings you expect to get. This can be done in a real-enough way to help you make concrete decisions about what changes are needed to make the data as useful as possible. As a result of this kind of exercise, you might decide not to ask particular questions or decide that you need to ask alternative or additional questions if you are to be able to analyse the data in the way you wish.

It would be worthwhile to involve a mix of people in this exercise who are likely to have different interests and perspectives, including tenants or residents themselves. This will help to ensure that the results from each question will be believable, credible and valid to those people.

Think about what contributes to service quality

Make a distinction between questions which ask about processes that enable a service to be provided (for example, the speed of response to a repair request) and questions about the outcomes of those services (for example, the quality of the work achieved).

To avoid questionnaires becoming an unstructured collection of loosely or unrelated questions, identify the different characteristics or dimensions of service quality and use each dimension as a section heading if several questions are to be asked on it. For example:

- access – such as convenient opening hours;
- reliability – such as keeping appointment times; and
- responsiveness – such as providing appointment times.

This approach will provide more useful information to improve services.

Go beyond the headline figures

It is also important to go beyond 'headline' approval ratings. For example, a useful satisfaction survey will ask questions that provide richer data in addition to questions that merely enable simple number counts such as '90 per cent of tenants are satisfied with the services provided by the landlord'. A useful survey will ask follow-up questions about respondents' reasons for expressing satisfaction or dissatisfaction. These questions will elicit information about what characteristics or aspects of the service are important to service users. In this way, valuable information about expectations can be gained and the landlord can then either continue to provide the service in the same way or make changes. For more guidance see the sections on assessing satisfaction and expectations, including the use of different types of rating scales and Servqual.

Consider scope for sharing resources

Whilst there is no endorsed standardised survey in Scotland, there may be scope for greater sharing of approaches; this might include omnibus surveys across different local authority departments or groups of housing associations. See the section on sharing ideas and resources amongst landlords.

Check that all questions asked are relevant to your organisation

Sometimes standardised questions are used by consultants without regard for the specific information requirements and local context of the commissioning organisation. A utilisation focus will help to ensure that questions are suitably adapted.

Only ask for socio-economic and demographic data that you can use

Surveys often ask for socio-economic and demographic data such as age, gender, disability, household type, employment status, minority ethnic group and income. It's worth asking how you intend to use this data. In some cases, sample sizes will be too small to allow any meaningful sub-group analysis. If you are interested in the particular views of a smaller sub-group or community such as lone parents or a specific minority ethnic community, you will need to conduct some complementary, more focused research. See, in particular, the sections on making research as inclusive as possible, focus groups and participatory methods.

If your purpose is to build up a profile of the client base across the whole organisation, this approach would only be valid if the sample is a statistically representative one. See the section on sampling for more guidance. If your purpose is to allow analysis of the views and experiences of particular groups and to identify scope for follow-up work, as long as you are clear about how you will be able to act on the data provided, the research will be worth doing. Asking for information about income is more difficult; some landlords have included this in general surveys to allow them to undertake affordability analysis. However, the amount of missing data and the unreliability of the data collected in this way undermines its accuracy and usefulness. A specific exercise with a more focused and sensitive approach is likely to yield better data for such purposes.

Test out the questions and the questionnaire beforehand

The wording of questions and the whole questionnaire should be piloted or tested before the survey starts with a group of people who can comment on design and administration aspects. This provides an opportunity to make last-minute changes that could enhance the quality of the data.

Planning and designing useful surveys: checklist

√ Be clear about the purpose of a general survey and whose views it is seeking. It may be more effective to target particular service users rather than conducting a general survey.

√ Clearly specify the target population for your survey.

√ Ask questions that are important to tenants or residents as well as questions that concern landlords.

√ Be clear about what changes in services may be realistically expected as a result of the survey.

√ Consider carefully how important it is to track changes over time; do not automatically ask the same questions as earlier surveys unless there is a good reason to do so.

√ Design use into the survey; ask for precise and actionable information and be clear about the intended use of every question in the survey.

√ Consider how the data is to be analysed in advance; discard any questions that are not essential, and discard or appropriately reword questions that are likely to elicit a low response.

√ Be clear in advance about who will use the survey results and exactly how the results are to be used to change services.

√ Always tell service users what changes have resulted from the last time they were consulted and acknowledge the value of their input. This will help to encourage future responses by demonstrating the actions that have resulted.

4.2.3 Planning for high quality surveys

This section looks at a number of issues that affect quality in survey design, data collection, analysis and reporting. It considers response rates, the use of contractors and in-house surveys, resources for surveys, different types of surveys, representativeness in sampling for surveys, high quality analysis and common errors and reporting.

Promoting better response rates in surveys

Surveys often claim to be representative in some way, but whether this is the case will depend on the nature and quality of the sample selected and the response rate.

Response rates vary for different types of survey; face-to-face surveys should achieve response rates of 60–70 per cent. Postal or telephone surveys are likely to achieve between 30–50 per cent. Response rates are said to be declining, although many satisfaction survey reports do not include this information. However, for some surveys it is not possible to calculate a true response rate because of the way the sample is chosen. See the section on sampling.

It may be that response rates differ for sub-groups of service users, across different geographical areas and tenure groups. It is important to consider what measures might be necessary to encourage responses from the full range of service users. This should be considered in advance and where possible steps taken to ensure sufficient responses are received to analyse the data in the way intended. It may be necessary to oversample certain sub-groups. The use of incentives such as prize draws and inclusion of a freepost reply or stamped addressed envelope for postal surveys may encourage responses. For face-to-face surveys, fieldwork procedures must be adequate to reflect the likely times that people will be at home and must ensure that sufficient calls are made to each address. This will usually be three or four calls at different times of the day and week.

Survey procedures will need to be adapted to accommodate respondents with literacy issues, with care and support needs and people whose first language is not English. This might mean briefing interviewers to bring in a translator when they come across a non-English speaker and avoiding the use of a postal or self-completion survey. See the sections on making research and consultation as inclusive as possible and ethical research practice.

All surveys should briefly outline their purpose to allow people to give informed consent to their participation. It is usual to assure participants of the confidentiality and anonymity of their responses. Strict anonymity may not be necessary; if the survey asks if participants would like information to be sent to them, it will be necessary to ensure that it is possible to do this and participants can be asked to provide their details.

Promoting better response rates: checklist

√ Adopt a utilisation focus to planning and designing the survey.

√ Consider how best to use publicity to promote the survey and encourage responses.

√ Involve tenants and residents in the design of the scope of the survey.

√ Get tenants' organisations on board to help publicise the survey and encourage participation.

√ Ensure that fieldwork procedures are adequate to provide sufficient opportunities for participation and consider the use of incentives to promote responses.

√ Adopt procedures to accommodate service users with literacy or support needs and those whose first language is not English.

Who should conduct general surveys?

Typically large-scale general satisfaction surveys have been conducted by external consultants who design and manage the survey process and analyse and report the findings. Options for managing research and consultation are discussed more fully elsewhere.

The use of external contractors has often been to provide an assessment that is seen as more independent than that likely to be provided if the work is conducted in-house. This is sometimes seen as more acceptable by service users themselves or by councillors and board members.

Each survey should have a brief or specification outlining the objectives, key stages of the project and outputs, including information required for quality assurance, even if the survey is to be conducted in-house.

Appropriate skills and capacity to manage large surveys are not always available in-house. Large surveys are likely to require substantial project management even if they are contracted out and will benefit from the use of dedicated research staff time.

However, surveys are expensive and managing at least some of the elements of the work in-house could provide cost savings.

A further option is to consider whether the contract for such surveys could include an element of skills transfer or capacity building for staff.

The active involvement of tenants or residents and other key stakeholders in the design of the scope of the survey and in the interpretation of the findings may allay fears about a lack of independence.

Contractors should have a track record in survey work and should work to a professional code of conduct or ethics. Market research and social survey companies should work to BS7911: Specification for organisations conducting market research and the Market Research Society Code of Conduct. Other contractors, however small, should work within a quality control framework such as the Social Research Association Ethical Guidelines. For a fuller discussion see the section on ethical research practice.

Contractors should be asked to provide information for quality assurance purposes including:

a) survey design procedures – how the specific questions and question wording was decided upon;
b) piloting procedures – how the survey was tested out;
c) sampling strategy – sample size, sample strategy and statistical information to assess the representativeness of the achieved sample;
d) response rates, including by key factors such as tenure or area;
e) commentary on response rates achieved;
f) fieldwork procedures; measures to promote response rates; the procedures adopted to accommodate service users with support needs and those whose first language is not English; and
g) ethical issues; for example provisions to ensure confidentiality, anonymity, informed consent where appropriate.

For more guidance on research commissioning and management, see the section on options for organising and managing research and consultation.

Practice point

- It may matter less exactly who conducts the survey in terms of carrying out the technical tasks, than a sense that there have been sufficient opportunities for all key stakeholders to influence the scope of the survey, the interpretation of the findings and decisions about what actions should be taken as a result. Consider establishing a critical reference or advisory group to be involved in this way.

Resources for surveys

There should be a specific budget for service user research and consultation.

How long it will take to conduct a survey will depend on sample size, sample dispersion, length of questionnaire and the form of administration. It may also depend on the available field force if interviewers are to be used. Postal surveys need to build in at least two weeks for initial replies, then a further two weeks after a reminder and so on for any subsequent reminders. Surveys conducted face-to-face will be more expensive and time consuming than postal or telephone surveys.

There may be scope for some organisations to develop a more strategic approach to research commissioning, perhaps working in partnership with others in the locality to share expertise and spread costs. See the section on budgeting for research and consultation.

Planning for high quality surveys: checklist

√ Ensure there is a survey brief outlining the objectives, key stages of the project and outputs, even if the survey is to be conducted in-house.

√ Consider whether you need to contract out large-scale surveys to specialists. If so, this should be by competitive tender.

√ Ensure any contractor has a track record in surveys of this kind and that they work to a professional code of conduct or ethics.

√ Ask contractors to provide detailed technical information for quality assurance purposes.

Different types of surveys

Surveys can be designed and administered in a number of different ways. The best format to be used depends both on the specific group of service users of interest and the survey topic and will affect the type, amount, quality and reliability of the data collected. The pros and cons of different survey types are discussed in Figure 4.1.

Figure 4.1 The pros and cons of different types of surveys

Face-to-face surveys

- Surveys conducted face-to-face are able to collect fuller, more complex data.
- The use of an interviewer gives more control over who actually answers the questions. This will be important with strict statistically representative sampling designs.
- Designed with care and administered well they will generally have better response rates than other types of survey.
- They are likely to be more expensive than other options.

Postal or self-completion surveys

- These are less reliable, need to be shorter than face-to-face surveys and use simple, 'tick boxes' types of questions.
- They can be cost effective and provide anonymity which may prompt a better response rate for more sensitive topics.
- Whilst many organisations may prefer postal surveys on cost grounds, it may not always be the most appropriate approach.
- There is a higher risk that some groups will be over or under-represented, such as those with language, literacy difficulties or with support needs.

Telephone surveys

- These need to be relatively short and straightforward.
- Some categories of people will be systematically under-represented.
- Telephone surveys may be useful for some service specific surveys where there is a contact number for each person from which to draw a sample.

Web surveys

- At present, web-based or email surveys are of limited value in customer research in public service contexts because the distribution of access to the web is not evenly spread across all sections of the population.

A residents' satisfaction survey – Queens Cross Housing Association

Queens Cross Housing Association (QXHA) is a long-established community based housing association in Glasgow. It was first registered as an association in 1976 and initially focused on tenement improvements for tenants and owners. Since then it has widened its focus into new- build housing, housing and support for particular needs, low-cost home ownership and community regeneration. Queens Cross has also taken on the transfer of homes from Scottish Homes and from Glasgow City Council and now has around 2,000 homes for rent and provides a factoring service to 1,100 owners. Queens Cross was inspected in October 2003.

QXHA uses a suite of different surveys for different purposes, including a suite of surveys for monitoring purposes. This is a good way of targeting different populations and helps to ensure that survey content is focused on specific issues as well as providing general feedback about satisfaction on a wider range of issues.

Queens Cross last undertook a Residents Satisfaction Survey in spring 2003. It had been several years since the last survey and they were aware that a Communities Scotland inspection visit was due. The association was keen to undertake a 'health check' and to obtain evidence of performance to inform the on-going stock transfer in Glasgow. It was also necessary to seek tenants' views in response to the 2001 Housing (Scotland) Act.

The survey was conducted by external consultants. Over 1,200 interviews were conducted door-to-door. The sample was selected in proportion to the distribution of properties across different administrative areas. The survey sought views on services provided by QXHA including caretaking, sheltered housing, supported tenancies, repairs and stair cleaning and was designed to provide a benchmark against which to assess improvements to current services. It also asked about incomes, rents, future options and views on wider action activity.

The design of the survey paid particular attention to getting the terminology right so that the questions asked and language used matched the local 'Queens Cross' culture and housing office structures.

This survey was followed up by three focus groups with tenants in different areas where issues of concern in each neighbourhood were able to be discussed in more detail; this helped to highlight different priorities for action at a more local level. Recruitment to focus groups was undertaken by the external consultant and a good attendance was achieved by payment of a £15 incentive.

A summary of the research findings was distributed to all residents and other agencies. It was hoped to have a number of internal working groups of residents and staff to address specific neighbourhood issues, but there was insufficient interest. The association raised the findings with external agencies such as the Council and the Police and also increased the target for emergency repair response times, partly in response to the survey findings.

Survey exercises of this type are costly and service providers may not be able to act on the information collected to achieve the outcomes that tenants and residents wish to see. The advice is to keep it short, simple and useful. Advice is **available on** commissioning of external contractors **to undertake this work and** quality assurance **issues**.

Representativeness in surveys: how important is it?

Decisions about whether a survey sample design should be based on the goal of statistical representativeness will depend on the purpose of the survey. Attempts to achieve statistical representativeness in research and consultation exercises are rarely feasible or successful and may hinder the use of approaches that might be more realistic, meaningful and useful. Great value is often attached to ideas about representativeness in research and consultation and this is discussed more fully in Section 3.

Ensuring high quality analysis and reporting of survey data

Survey data is not always analysed as fully as it could be. This is probably because too much data is collected without a clear sense of exactly what it is for. If the use of the data has been designed in from the start, it should be clear how all the questions are to be analysed.

Simple descriptive statistics such as frequency counts and percentages will usually be necessary. It may also be useful to analyse the experience or views of different sub-groups within the research population, such as tenants in different areas, types of properties or those with different demographic characteristics.

The interpretation and presentation of survey findings must be believable, credible and valid to a critical reference or advisory group. It is difficult to undertake quantitative analysis in a genuinely participatory way, but checking emerging findings back with an advisory group in a more iterative way may assist the process of interpretation and validation.

The survey analysis should be written up in a way that clearly presents the key findings and addresses the original information requirements. This should be comprehensive in relation to the aims of the survey, but need not be complicated or extensive.

Tables, figures and charts should be used to convey key points, not necessarily every point.

Avoiding errors and misrepresentation in analysis

There are a number of common errors and misrepresentations in analysis. To avoid these, the following checks should be made.

- Ensure that all the data collected has been fully analysed including sub-group analysis and that the analysis addresses the original information requirements.

- Ensure that categories have not been combined to distort the findings, such as ‘very’ and ‘fairly satisfied’.

- Make sure comparisons of answers across different groups are on a 'like-for-like' basis.
- Ensure clarity about how missing data or 'don't knows' have been treated and ensure that where these are a large proportion of the total responses this is noted as a finding, rather than being disregarded.
- Ensure that appropriate statistical procedures have been used and reported.
- Make sure that claims about the wider research population are not made on the basis of very small sample or sub-sample sizes.
- Ensure the number base of the figures presented is quoted.
- Where there are low numbers of cases ensure that the absolute figures are quoted rather than percentages.
- Make sure the results from key sub-groups are analysed.
- Check that the scale used on figures and charts does not distort the findings.
- Ensure that claims are not made about the wider applicability of the findings unless the sampling strategy supports such statistical inference.
- Make sure that the interpretation of survey findings is grounded in the evidence presented.
- Use the indicators reported to identify issues for further investigation.
- Ensure that any apparent inconsistencies or contradictory findings are high lighted and alternative interpretations are given.

Reporting survey findings

Presentation formats should be appropriate for the audience and made available, as appropriate and practicable, in suitable formats such as Braille, tapes and other languages. Outputs should be available in other media such as presentations, newsletters and visual displays.

Ensure that all service users, staff, committee members and councillors are informed of the results and their feedback invited. The findings should make it clear what the implications of the research are for service delivery and any further research that's needed to more fully understand the results.

Reporting survey findings: checklist

√ Ensure the findings are written up in an appropriate and accessible way that identifies the implications for service delivery and the actions to be taken as a result.

√ Consider whether outputs should be available in other formats and media.

√ Ensure that all service users, staff, committee members and councillors are informed of the results and their feedback invited.

√ Consider what further research and consultation needs still exist.

4.2.4 Servqual

An understanding of customer expectations is essential for performance improvement. This is discussed in full in the section on assessing satisfaction and expectations.

Servqual is a service quality measurement tool that assesses both service perceptions and expectations across a range of different service characteristics. Using Servqual, the gap between expectations and perceptions can be analysed to help managers see where to target and prioritise improvement efforts for best effect.

General satisfaction surveys tend to focus on customer perceptions of the services they are currently getting and not their expectations. The extent to which services meet customers' needs or expectations is one measure of service quality. The fact that frequently little is known about customer expectations makes it difficult to interpret the ratings produced by satisfaction surveys.

The Servqual approach is best suited to assessing existing service quality. It assesses customer satisfaction with the processes supporting the service provision and not the quality of the end result, or outcome. For example, it will not help to assess the quality of a completed repair, although it will assess the processes necessary to provide a repairs service.

Practice point

- Think carefully about what it is you are trying to find out about services before deciding on a methodology. If you are interested in customer expectations or needs there may be other ways to explore these.

Servqual is a survey tool that calculates 'gap scores' to measure the difference between expectations and perceptions for different aspects of services. It provides a useful structure for thinking about which aspects of a service affect service quality.

Figure 4.2 (page 77) breaks down the different determinants of service quality by highlighting the different service characteristics that are relevant to most services.

Figure 4.2 Determinants of service quality and examples

Determinants of service quality	Examples
Access the ease and convenience of accessing the service	neighbourhood offices; one stop shops; convenient operating hours; 24 hour telephone; internet access
Communication keeping customers informed in a language they understand; listening to customers	Plain English pamphlets and brochures; communication material tailored to the need of individual groups (ethnic minorities, visually impaired etc); suggestions and complaints systems
Competence having the skills and knowledge to provide the service	all staff knowing, and able to do, their job
Courtesy politeness, respect, consideration, friendliness of staff at all levels	staff behaving politely and pleasantly
Credibility trustworthiness, reputation and image	the reputation of the service in the wider community; staff generating a feeling of trust with customers
Reliability providing consistent, accurate and dependable service; delivering the service that was promised	standards defined in local service charters; accuracy of records; accuracy of community charge bills; doing jobs right first time; keeping promises and deadlines
Responsiveness being willing and ready to provide service when needed	resolving problems quickly; providing appointment times
Security physical safety; financial security; confidentiality	providing services in a safe and secure manner
Tangibles the physical aspects of the service such as equipment, facilities, staff appearance	up-to-date equipment and facilities; staff uniforms
Understanding the customer knowing individual customer needs; recognising the repeat customer	tailoring services where practical to meet individual needs

Source: Accounts Commission (1999) *Can't get no satisfaction*?

Practice point

- The task of identifying the different characteristics of service quality in this way is an important step in the design of any questionnaire or survey, whether or not it uses a Servqual methodology. This will avoid questionnaires becoming an unstructured collection of loosely or unrelated questions and so will enhance the usefulness of the data collected.

A full explanation of this approach is beyond the scope of this guidance. There is some experience of using Servqual in the public sector in Scotland and further information and guidance is available elsewhere[20].

In outline, Servqual condenses these ten determinants into five groups or dimensions of service quality. A questionnaire is then designed which uses a series of 'gap statements' each of which are used to assess both expectations and perceptions. For example, in assessing responsiveness the expectation statement will be assessed in a general way such as 'Employees of an excellent service will tell customers exactly when the service will be provided'. A seven point response scale from strongly disagree to strongly agree is used. The perception statements are comparable but based on the specific service being assessed. The questionnaire also uses a section for respondents to indicate the relative importance of the five dimensions.

Servqual is an attractive idea but the design of a Servqual survey is complex and samples should be statistically representative. This approach will require expertise in questionnaire design, survey methodology, sampling design and statistical analysis. External assistance may be necessary if it is to be conducted effectively.

A further issue is one of presentation of findings. Typically the scores produced are negative; that is that an organisation will usually fail to meet expectations. Whilst service managers may find this useful information of help to direct their efforts towards service improvement, there may be issues about direct reporting of these scores to staff, elected members or Board members and the public. Negative scores may automatically be seen as service failure.

Servqual does not give a complete picture of needs, expectations and perceptions. Expectations will change over time, although the survey can be repeated to capture this. The priorities and needs of the public service provider may conflict with those of the service users; the results of Servqual may surprise and challenge assumptions made by service managers. For example, service users may not prioritise the state of an organisation's premises, although as an employer investment in modern office premises may be important for other reasons.

[20] Accounts Commission (1999) *Can't get no satisfaction? Using a gap approach to measure service quality*

Servqual: checklist

√ It is important to understand service user expectations; there may be a number of ways to do this and which should be considered more generally, even if a Servqual approach is not adopted.

√ Expectations will change over time and the methods used need to be able to capture these changes.

√ Consider how to assess satisfaction with both processes and outcomes of service delivery.

√ Consider whether there is the appropriate technical capacity to conduct a rigorous Servqual exercise or whether you need external support.

√ Think about how best to present the gap scores to different audiences and how best to encourage discussion of the findings of this approach.

√ There are also useful lessons for general questionnaire design in terms of identifying different determinants and dimensions of service character. This is likely to enhance the usefulness of all survey approaches.

Alternative and related approaches

- Focus groups
- Using comments, compliments and complaints as feedback
- Using existing information

4.2.5 Customer and other panels

A Panel is essentially a group of customers or service users who have consented to be part of a pool of people which will be used to select samples to take part in periodic research and consultation exercises. They are sometimes referred to as user groups. A variety of methods may be used to collect data from Panels; for example, Panels can be used as a basis for sampling for a survey or a source of people to recruit to focus groups or other qualitative approaches.

This is an appealing approach for many social landlords. The scope for the use of Panels goes beyond their use as a source of participants for survey work. However, because of their convenience, Panels run the risk of over-reliance by landlords. Panels need to be actively monitored and refreshed to maintain the desired level of 'representativeness' and are not immune from all the common problems of research fatigue that are evident in other approaches.

Practice point

- Both the design and maintenance of the Panel and the individual methods used with the Panel influence the quality of the data collected in this way and need to be considered.

When might a Panel be useful?

Establishing a Panel is a convenient and visible way to recruit people willing to provide feedback on their experience of services.

As with any sample, a key issue is to decide how important strict statistical representativeness is given the purposes for which the Panel will be used. To be statistically representative, Panels should be selected in the same way as samples for general surveys. See the section on sampling for more guidance.

Basing a Panel on a non-probability sample may be acceptable given the purpose and use to be made of the data. In practice, Panels tend to be based on self-selection; willing people are recruited through targeted mailings and publicity. However, quota sampling can be used to ensure that the membership reflects the demographic profile of the wider population of service users. Panel members may differ from the wider population by the fact they agreed to take part and over time may become conditioned and more knowledgeable than the population that they are supposed to 'represent'.

Loss of Panel members over time means that the Panel needs to be continually refreshed. It may be difficult to recruit members from lower socio-economic groups, ethnic minorities and young people. Downward trends in response rates over time may highlight research saturation or disillusionment amongst Panel members. Panels require active management; the composition of the Panel should be reviewed regularly and new members recruited.

Despite their convenience, Panels may not be the best way to seek feedback from certain groups who may be missed out by traditional recruitment methods. Research focusing on the views of certain groups, such as young people, minority ethnic communities and people with disabilities may require separate, targeted recruitment to ensure sufficient numbers and the participation of these key groups. Recruitment through voluntary and community groups or through snowball sampling is likely to produce more informed feedback.

As with other approaches, Panels should be part of a wider research and consultation strategy rather than seen as the answer to all consultation requirements.

How does a Panel work?

It is important to distinguish between the size of Panel and the size of samples, which are selections of sub-groups from the Panel.

The size of the Panel will depend on the expected frequency of consultation exercises with the Panel, anticipated loss of members over time and the range and type of services being consulted on, particularly the likelihood of recent service use.

Local authority wide Citizens' Panels tend to be between 1,000 to 2,000 people. Panels comprising users of specific services or tenants may not need to be of this scale.

Decisions about sample design and size for each exercise that draws on the Panel have to be taken in the light of the purpose of each exercise and will be different for quantitative and qualitative approaches. One of the dangers is that Panel members may be assumed to be service users and that they are asked questions about services of which they have no recent experience.

Incentives to join a Panel run the risk of biasing the sample, as with any other sampling approach. However, it may well be worth offering incentives to respond to surveys and for participation in qualitative exercises.

Each of the methods used with the Panel, such as surveys or focus groups should be fit for the purpose and appraised on these grounds.

All Panel members, service users, staff, committee or board members and councillors should all be informed of findings and notified of actions proposed or taken as a result of consultation exercises undertaken using the Panel. When reporting back, it may be worth considering including all Panel members, rather than just those that have taken part in the specific exercise, in order to demonstrate how the Panel is used and maintain its profile.

Customer panels – Count me in: Grampian Housing Association

Grampian Housing Association set up a customer panel in 2003 and to date has conducted three surveys using the panel as a sampling base.

There are 154 members of the panel at present. The panel has aimed to be representative of the Grampian customer base, by age, gender, tenure and geographical area. Recruitment to the panel is a continuous process; efforts are targeted at groups of customers who have been under-represented such as owner occupiers and younger age groups. The panel does not actually meet although some surveys are followed up by informal meetings to discuss survey findings and recommendations in more detail. The panel is managed by an independent consultancy which was felt to provide greater validity to the process, although experience suggests that this may not be as important as had initially been thought.

The first survey was undertaken in February 2004 and achieved a 55% response rate. This survey focused on awareness of the Customer Participation Strategy; how people make contact and raise issues and concerns with Grampian; views on whether Grampian takes account of customer views and how customers might have a bigger say in the affairs of the association. It also gathered views on the issues that future surveys should include.

The second survey was undertaken in May and June 2004; this time a 72% response rate was achieved, thought to have been boosted by the incentive of a £50 gift voucher. The survey focused on the repairs service as it relates to tenants, shared owners and owner occupiers; satisfaction with homes and views on proposals for a new Customer Response Unit.

The most recent survey was conducted in March and April 2005 and focused on views on a proposed Customer Conference. Although this time questionnaires were sent to a greater number of panel members than before, the response rate was similar to the first survey at 54%.

Each survey report is sent to survey participants and gives details of the response of the Association to the findings. One example of action following feedback from service users is the establishment of a Customer Response Unit, in response to issues raised by the panel in contacting the Association with routine enquiries. The most recent survey will help inform and shape the second Customer Conference planned for October 2005.

At each stage, members who did not respond to the last survey are contacted to see if they still wish to remain on the panel. The panel is publicised through other surveys such as the Customer Satisfaction Survey and information is sent out to those who request it. It is also promoted to all customers on an on-going basis by staff, including to new tenants. Although the representativeness of the panel is still an objective for Grampian, they are now taking a more relaxed view about this issue: '*our views have relaxed on what's representative – we were a bit hung up on the science of it*'. They now have taken the view that they should not apply a higher standard of 'representativeness' to this approach than is taken with other forms of participation. However, they do see it as a key issue that efforts are made to involve younger customers.

Using Panels: checklist

√ Ensure that the establishment of a Panel is part of a wider strategic approach to research and consultation.

√ Consider the full range of options for how the Panel may be used to ensure it is of sufficient size and that key groups of people are included in the Panel in sufficient numbers.

√ Be aware of the limitations of the Panel; don't use it just because it's convenient. Make a clear case for its use each time and use complementary methods to seek the views of those not included in the Panel or the sample drawn from it.

√ Ensure there is a tightly defined focus for each survey and ask quite specific questions on which changes to operational practices can be made. Keep regular surveys using the Panel short and simple.

√ Note that some issues, such as allocations, are not easily addressed through use of a Panel. Other approaches may be more appropriate to explore such issues.

√ Be aware that it may be some time since Panel members have actually used a particular service, so it may be necessary to increase the sample size to ensure enough recent service users are included or adopt a different approach.

√ Note that it may not always be possible to track changes over time, if there is a desire to focus on different topics each time.

√ Small achieved sample sizes sometimes mean that it is not possible to analyse the data on a sub-group basis such as area or tenure.

√ Maintain membership of the Panel on a continuous basis; make sure that people really understand what's involved when they sign up to it.

√ Consider whether strict statistical representativeness is less important than efforts to ensure that the diversity of customers have the opportunity to be included.

√ Ensure that the organisation as a whole 'buys-in' to the Panel to ensure that best use is made of the opportunities to get feedback on the full range of services. This may be achieved through clear linkages to action plans, improvement planning and explicit selling of the benefits to other staff.

√ Ensure that Panel members, service users, staff, committee or Board members and councillors are informed about the way the Panel is being used and the specific results of each feedback exercise in which Panel members are involved, so that they are aware that their views have been acted on. This should include reporting findings to all Panel members each time, even if they have not participated in a particular survey.

Alternative and related approaches

- General satisfaction surveys and opinion polls
- Continuous monitoring surveys
- Service specific, recent contact and exit surveys
- Mystery shopping
- Using comments, compliments and complaints as feedback

4.2.6 Service specific, recent contact or exit surveys

These are surveys based on people who have recently used a service, such as the repairs service. They are appropriate when it is more important to have informed feedback based on experience, rather than the views of a wider sample of the general population or all service users. They can be used in a more regular and routine way than general satisfaction surveys which only happen every few years.

Such surveys can be used for different purposes and this will affect they way they should be conducted. Data on experience of services may be used to support long term monitoring of services, assess the performance of contractors and to identify and follow up individual dissatisfied service users. These approaches are good for getting short and simple, more 'everyday' feedback.

Service specific surveys have many advantages. They allow for targeted and focused feedback, which can frequently be designed and managed in-house. They run a risk of becoming so routine that it is unclear exactly what their purpose is and of over-collecting data that is not analysed or used fully. Where this is the case, there is a risk of cynicism and 'survey fatigue' amongst staff and service users. It will be important to keep them under regular review.

Who should conduct service specific surveys?

Service specific surveys are likely to be of wide relevance across an organisation, rather than being seen as the preserve of the research or consultation team, so for example, property maintenance or environmental services teams are likely to be interested in using these kinds of approaches.

Experience suggests that such surveys are less likely to be conducted by an external contractor, however, this might be an appropriate option. Queens Cross Housing Association has used a range of survey approaches which it has managed in-house. An issue to consider is the capacity to analyse all the data collected on a regular basis in order to make full use of the information gathered.

Routine surveys for monitoring purposes – Queens Cross Housing Association

Queens Cross Housing Association aims to assess resident satisfaction on all completed projects in order to obtain feedback on the quality of services and design of properties to improve future performance. Surveys are conducted after comprehensive tenement improvements and major repairs programmes and snapshot surveys are undertaken on environmental maintenance and stair cleaning services. These are used to monitor the performance of contractors.

After comprehensive tenement improvements, a two-page self-completion survey is distributed to tenants on their return to the properties by Development Team staff. This is designed in-house and asks about satisfaction with the specific works carried out within the properties and to common areas, satisfaction with the contractor and association staff and suggestions about the quality of the service for the future. Comments are fed into the design of the next phase of the improvement works. These surveys generally have a fairly high response rate of around 74% although the response rate to some questions is lower and staff have re-designed the questionnaire to encourage better response rates.

After major repairs a similar short satisfaction survey is distributed on the completion of works with the intention of using the findings to improve the service, design specifications and contractors input. The main issue with these surveys is the low response rates; having tried different approaches the association has found that distribution and collection by hand promotes a better response than leaving a SAE.

'Snapshot' surveys of the environmental maintenance and stair cleaning services are also conducted, usually on a monthly basis. These surveys usually target small areas of residents, rotated around different areas to get very focused, localised information. The survey forms are only one page long and are distributed with an SAE to be posted back to the association. On average, the response rate is about 40%. Findings are discussed with contractors in order to improve the general standards of the service, rather than remedying specific instances of poor service.

Queens Cross finds this range of satisfaction surveys are a useful way of providing a 'health check' for the services they provide to a range of residents. They provide regular evidence of performance and are used as a form of monitoring of the association and its contractors. Short in-house surveys of this type are relatively cheap and can be conducted by non-specialist staff. The main drawback is low response rates and the task of analysing all the information that is returned so that it can inform consideration of improvements to services.

Practice point

- It is important to define the target population very clearly; it is particularly important to ensure that questions are asked of people with recent experience of the use of the service which is being investigated.

Asking the right questions of the right people

Much of the guidance on general satisfaction surveys is relevant here too. It will often not be possible or even necessary to draw a statistically representative random sample. The most likely way to do this would be draw a random sample of recently completed jobs, say in the last month, from a record of all jobs. If a Panel is being used as a sample, it will be particularly important to confirm that Panel members have recent experience of service use, given the purpose of the specific exercise.

If a sample is selected, it should be based on comprehensive and up to date contact information such as addresses or telephone numbers. The survey should take place as soon as possible after the service has been delivered.

If there is no sample frame of all service users and the purpose of the survey is to collate typical or general experience of service use, samples could be based on quotas reflecting the spread of locations, service delivery points and types of service.

Flow sampling may be appropriate. However, it may be difficult to rely on staff selecting a sample at the point of delivery and may be more reliable to use a census rather than a sample. Samples based on comment cards, pre-paid reply slips, suggestion boxes or local surgeries are self-selecting and may be very useful in highlighting problematic issues, but should not be used as the basis of an overall assessment of the service.

Where the intention of the survey is to follow up dissatisfaction, the survey should be a continuous exercise rather than an occasional one and be based on a 100 per cent census of all service users, rather than a sample, so that everyone has the opportunity to have their problems addressed.

What type of survey should be conducted?

A variety of methods can be used to gather feedback in this way. These include interviews, postal surveys, telephone surveys, self-completion tear-off slips and so on each with advantages and limitations. See Figure 4.1.

The nature of the service being surveyed will affect the choice of method. In most cases, telephone, postal or self-completion surveys and the use of tear-off slips will be suitable, as long as they are short and use simple, ‘tick boxes’ types of questions. There should be an opportunity for service users to add their own comments.

Self-completion surveys may be better at getting a more considered, honest appraisal than a telephone survey and fuller information than a tear-off slip. Use of in-house staff to undertake interviews may compromise data quality. Here use of independent interviewers or self-completion methods that offer greater privacy may be more appropriate.

The use of the data should be designed into the survey from the start as part of a utilisation focus to the research. Questions should be worded to provide useful information on which responsive action can be based. Simulating how the data will be used will also help in the design of the questions to be asked. These kinds of surveys should be able to be analysed fully and quickly in order that the data is as recent and as useful as possible.

It will be important to consider the range and source of responses to service specific surveys to consider whether and how those who have responded are likely to differ from those that have not. Surveys based on small samples and low response rates should be treated with care. For example, if 250 questionnaires were posted to recent service users and only 36 replied, giving a response rate of 14 per cent, this would be of little value. A few simple questions asked routinely at the point of delivery, together with use of existing information would be likely to be of more value. Surveys with low response rates may provide informative data for landlords, but it is important not be tempted to make wide ranging claims on the basis of such responses and it will be necessary to undertake more robust exercises from time to time to address these deficiencies.

It may be helpful to encourage a better response rate to ensure that even simple reply slips tell people the purpose of the exercise, what action has been taken on the basis of such exercises and how feedback has been incorporated into service standards.

Data collected in this way should be analysed frequently as it will become out of date quickly and be less useful. Individual instances of dissatisfaction should be followed up promptly. The analysis should identify any requirements for further investigation of trends or issues.

The results should be reported to all key audiences in an appropriate and accessible way. This need not take the form of a report but could use newsletters or local newspapers, posters, leaflets or presentations to tenants' groups or forums. Other service users, staff, committee or board members and councillors should also be informed.

Service specific surveys: checklist

√ Be clear about the purpose of the survey and the use to which the data will be put.

√ Check that the survey is of recent service users, rather than a general sample.

√ Keep it short and simple and use local terminology.

√ Be clear about what service changes may realistically be expected as a result of the survey.

- √ Design use in: each survey should have a tightly defined focus and ask for views and information on clear specific issues that can be easily analysed and acted upon.

- √ Focus groups or other consultative input from residents and staff can assist in both the design of surveys and the further analysis of the findings.

- √ Check that the sample was selected in an appropriate way and based on reliable, up-to-date information.

- √ Choose an appropriate type of survey and consider how to maximise response rates. Distribution and collection of questionnaires by local staff or contractors may encourage better response rates.

- √ Consider whether anonymity is necessary; it may not be an advantage for survey responses to be anonymous. There should at least be some provision for more in-depth follow up of responses on an individual basis at the discretion of the individual resident.

- √ Be aware that small sample sizes are likely; this will mean that it is usually not possible to analyse the data on a sub-group basis, such as by different age groups.

- √ Ensure that all the data is analysed promptly and fully.

- √ Ensure that appropriate follow up in individual cases is undertaken.

- √ Analyse and report the findings in an appropriate and accessible way to all relevant parties including service users themselves, ensuring that the implications for service delivery been identified and invite feedback.

- √ Identify any further research and consultation needs.

Alternative and related approaches

- General satisfaction surveys

- Continuous monitoring surveys

- Using existing information

- Mystery shopping

- Using comments, compliments and complaints as feedback

- Significant event analysis

4.2.7 Continuous monitoring surveys

Continuous or regular monitoring surveys are based on rolling or regular samples to provide a form of frequent monitoring and more up to date information than that available from infrequent large scale surveys. They may use any of the sampling techniques discussed above. Designed carefully, the provision of more regular information may be of greater practical use and may complement general surveys undertaken on an occasional basis.

Great care needs to be taken in sampling. Clarity of purpose of the regular monitoring survey is important as the common goals of getting both feedback on recent service use and assessing general satisfaction will require different sampling strategies. Given the opportunity of getting more up to date, actionable information through such regular surveys, in most cases, it is likely that the sample should be based on the selection of those with recent experience of the services being examined, rather than including a general sample of all tenants or residents or combining the two. It is important not to mix up sampling 'events' such as the use of a service and 'populations' such as tenants.

The main drawback of this approach is that it is likely to produce small sample sizes at each cycle and therefore limit the kind of analysis that can be undertaken.

There are also administrative tasks associated with this approach. In order to choose a random sample of all recent service users, it will be important for up to date records including contact details to be kept. This will require particular administrative diligence to ensure the list is accurate and up to date.

Practice point

- Regular surveys are an attractive approach to providing more up to date information from service users. Their strength lies in the ability to ask very specific actionable questions about recent experience for performance management and service delivery purposes. This needs to be balanced with the desire to ask standardised questions to build a larger picture of satisfaction and change over time, which may be better addressed by other means.

Continuous Monitoring of Tenant Satisfaction (CMTSS) – Ayrshire North Commuity Housing Organisation

Ayrshire North Community Housing Organisation (ANCHO) is based in Irvine and owns 717 houses. It was established in 2000, after taking ownership of housing stock from Scottish Homes through a Large Scale Voluntary Transfer.

ANCHO established a system of continuous monitoring of tenant satisfaction (CMTSS) to gather regular, up to date information on levels of customer satisfaction with service delivery to help them determine service standards. This was designed to build on previous tenant satisfaction surveys undertaken before and since stock transfer.

The CMTSS is based on quarterly surveys of a sample of tenants in order to generate 'real-time' feedback from customers. Initially the sample included both tenants who have recently used particular services and a more general sample from across the association; as the purpose of the survey evolved, it focused solely on recent service users. About 70 cases are sampled each quarter; the most recent results of the twelfth of 12 surveys take into account, cumulatively, the experience of over 800 cases of service use.

The work is undertaken by an independent contractor. They select the samples, design the questionnaires and undertake the fieldwork, analysis and reporting. Tenants are contacted first by telephone, then by post, then finally in person at their home.

The CMTSS provides information on the social, economic and demographic characteristic of tenants; their views on whether the rent is value for money; views on the quality of information provided by ANCHO; preferred methods of consultation and involvement; views about current services and how they could be improved; and attitudes towards tenants own homes, neighbourhoods and general environment and how these could be improved.

Every quarter ANCHO managers receive an emailed report which details both the results for the last period, plus the cumulative results to date. The information acts as a useful prompt to consider service user feedback. It is discussed by the Senior Management Team who identifies what actions are needed to address the issues identified. The information also informs policy and service reviews, the establishment of key performance indicator targets, benchmarking and is reported to the Management Board.

The main strengths of this process are the regular and ongoing focus on tenant satisfaction issues and the provision of regular information. The fact that it is independently conducted is valued by the Management Board, as it provides an externally validated assessment of tenants' views. The process is flexible and can be adapted as needs change; for example more area-based analysis is now conducted than when the process started. Changes in overall levels of satisfaction are measured against the baseline provided by the full Tenant Satisfaction Survey carried out in March 2002. ANCHO now plan a further full tenant satisfaction survey to update this baseline and plan to continue to use continuous surveys in a more focused way alongside focus groups and estate based meetings to improve its knowledge of service users' views.

4.2.8 *Mystery shopping*

Mystery shopping is the use of individuals trained to observe, experience and measure any customer service process, by acting as service users or customers and reporting back on their experiences in a detailed and objective way. This procedure can be used over the telephone, in face to face situations or by email.

The idea is to test out the actual customer experience of services. It might be used as a free-standing exercise, to follow up an issue identified through other methods such as a satisfaction survey or after analysing recent complaints.

Telephone based mystery shopping may be well suited to covering any large, dispersed population. There may be scope to undertake this kind of approach on an on-going basis to get more regular feedback.

The exercise involves deciding on suitable scenarios – typical situations or issues that service users may present; rather like 'frequently asked questions'. The whole quality and value of the mystery shopping process depends on the design and execution of the scenarios used to test service delivery. Experience suggests that this approach should not be too ambitious. Planned but simple approaches are likely to be most effective.

Mystery shopping – Aberdeenshire

Aberdeenshire Council undertook a corporate mystery shopper's exercise in 2001. A recent survey had suggested there was an issue about difficulties in telephoning the council. Mystery shopping was used to find out more about typical experiences of telephoning the council.

An independent consultant was used to undertake a small scale telephone exercise over a few weeks. The scenarios to be used were developed by asking for FAQs from service areas in the council and also any topics that they wanted to know more about. Local people who sounded like typical customers were recruited by the consultancy to make around 300 telephone calls.

Both staff and the trade unions were involved in the decision to conduct the mystery shopper exercise and knew that this was going to happen, although not the details of exactly when and where the calls would be made.

This approach generated useful performance data on how calls were being handled at the time; both quantitative data such as how long it took to get through and qualitative data such as the way the query was dealt with.

The information gathered in this way was fed into a working group of front line staff supported by a senior manager. This led to the production of guidance for staff on how to use the telephone system better.

The Council was pleased with how the exercise had gone. It was fairly quick, relatively simple, very focused and cost-effective. Some staff felt 'spied on'; this is an issue that any such exercise needs to tackle with care.

This approach raises a number of issues of ethical research practice. It is important that staff and other appropriate parties such as trade unions know that mystery shopping is planned. They should not be told exactly when and where it is to happen as this may undermine the process.

As with the use of complaints as feedback, the critical issue is the culture of the organisation and an attitude that is not about allocating blame for poor performance but to draw out wider lessons. This means that the identity of the parties is not really the point.

There should also be feedback to staff on the findings and the intended follow up actions based on using this technique.

Mystery shopping scenarios

The scenarios to be used in mystery shopping exercise should be:

- Relevant: designed to test the specific service on which data is required?
- Credible: not too ambitious, but mimicking natural service user behaviour and able to be enacted convincingly? The use of jargon or technical language will jeopardise the exercise.
- Practical: simple, brief and appropriate? Complex or unrealistic scenarios will compromise the quality of the data and the exercise and place an undue burden on staff time.
- Safe: not risking the personal safety of the mystery shoppers themselves?
- Objective: focusing on factual information? Recording what happened, rather than how the shopper feels about it in order to be consistent across all assessments made by different shoppers. However, more subjective assessments may be used to assist in interpretation of data. These may include perceived confidence of staff or overall satisfaction with the service, for example.

How to sample in mystery shopping

Mystery shopping assessments should be made on the basis of a sufficient sample of calls to be able to analyse how services are delivered differently across different locations, offices or at different times of the day, without compromising staff anonymity. The number of calls required will depend on the type of analysis required; for example the level of disaggregation across geographical areas, different services or types of inquiry. Samples should be selected to reflect patterns of service usage based on an analysis of any existing management information and may be based on quotas drawn up to reflect this pattern, so that the sample chosen is typical of the usual pattern of inquiries.

Who should conduct the mystery shopping?

The use of professional mystery shoppers employed by market research companies or consultancies may provide a degree of independence for the exercise and may be important in reassuring staff about the purpose and quality of the exercise. Some organisations might be interested in using their own staff or tenants to be mystery shoppers. People with 'insider knowledge' of an organisation may find it more difficult not to use jargon or to retain their independence.

There are issues about care in recruitment and training of whoever is to undertake this kind of exercise, whether they are staff, tenants or people employed by a market research company, to ensure that people understand the need for consistency of approach. Shoppers need to be trained to ensure they understand and are able to follow standardised procedures; it is important that the details of the calls made, timing and outcomes are recorded. They also need to be able to follow up the responses they receive with further questions in a fair and objective way.

Mystery shopping using tenants – Aberdeen City Council

Aberdeen City Council has recently undertaken a mystery shopping exercise using tenants as the mystery shoppers. They see this is as part of their wider tenant participation strategy and were successful in obtaining a grant from Communities Scotland to support the exercise. The exercise was overseen by a Steering Group that has tenant representatives on it and which has support from the Tenant Participation Advisory Service (TPAS).

In order to recruit mystery shoppers, flyers were sent to all tenants and this identified 30-40 new people that were interested. Mystery shoppers get a £10 voucher for making four calls or one office visit in person. Their expenses are also met.

Seven tenants took part and undertook around 38 mystery shopping visits to offices and over 300 telephone calls. The exercise used 14 different scenarios based on issues concerned with repairs, allocations, homelessness, tenant participation, customer services and the Right to Repair. These were made up by the Steering Group.

Two separate focus groups of tenants (not those involved in the mystery shopping exercise) and front line staff were also conducted to discuss and validate the data received from the exercise. These were facilitated by an external consultant.

The exercise went well and the council think that this approach has advantages as it is based on real tenants' views and experience. Whilst there has been some suspicion, most people in the council are now supportive of the approach.

The use of tenants to undertake mystery shopping is an interesting development, which may offer other advantages in terms of broader tenant participation. It does beg the question about whether it is possible to make better use of the actual experience of tenants, in effect to systematically gather information from real scenarios by actual tenants. Ways to do this might be through the use of stories, analysis of 'significant' events and analysis of complaints.

How to analyse and report data

The data collected through mystery shopping exercises should not be reported on an individual or case-by-case basis; the purpose of the exercise is not to identify individual instances of performance, but to examine whether there are consistent patterns in service response. This means that where the number of incidences is small, care should be taken to protect the anonymity of staff in reporting. The overall analysis should identify any requirements for further investigation of trends or issues.

The results should be reported to all key audiences in an appropriate and accessible way. This should be proportionate to the scale of the exercise and use existing media or forums. This need not take the form of a report but could use newsletters or local newspapers, posters, leaflets or presentations to tenants' groups or forums. Other service users, staff, committee members and councillors should also be informed. The implications of the research for service delivery and any further research needs should be clearly identified.

Mystery shopping: checklist

√ The scenarios used should be relevant, credible, practical and safe.

√ The sample size and selection should be appropriate for the kind of analysis required and should reflect the usual pattern of inquiries across the service.

√ The objectivity of the exercise should be safeguarded by careful selection of mystery shoppers and thorough training.

√ Data should be recorded consistently and analysed objectively and appropriately.

√ Data should be reported only at an aggregate level and the anonymity of staff protected.

√ Staff and trade unions should be told that mystery shopping is planned and that they may be involved in the decision-making process.

√ The findings should be written up in an appropriate and accessible way and reported to all key audiences, including staff.

√ The implications of the research for service delivery should be identified.

√ Any further research needs should be identified.

Alternative and related approaches

- Using stories
- Significant event analysis
- Using comments, compliments and complaints as feedback

4.3 Sampling strategies and issues

This section explains the principles and practices of different sampling strategies for quantitative and qualitative research and consultation. A full account of sampling theory and practice is beyond the scope of this guidance and is available elsewhere[21].

A basic understanding of terms will assist in the drawing up of specifications and assessing the quality of work undertaken by contractors. For some research exercises it may be necessary to seek specialist statistical expertise to draw an appropriate sample.

4.3.1 Random or probability sampling

If a statistically representative survey is required from which inferences can be made about the wider population, the survey must be based on a random (probability) sample. See Section 3 for a fuller explanation.

In a sampling sense, random does not mean arbitrary which is the popular use of the term. A random sample is selected in a systematic way that gives every member of the research population a known chance or probability of selection, which is not zero.

Random sampling is almost never used in qualitative research based on interviews and participant observation. Most qualitative research is concerned with generalising research findings to theory rather than to populations so quantitative concerns about representativeness and random sampling are less relevant for qualitative researchers. Statistical representation is most likely to be necessary in a large-scale general satisfaction survey, a housing needs or organisation-wide survey.

Sampling frames

Selecting a random sample requires a sampling frame. This is a list of all the members of the population. Examples of lists are addresses from property files, the Electoral Register, the Council Tax register, a specially compiled sample frame such as a list of all recent service users, or a list developed from multi-stage cluster sampling. Many large-scale general population surveys select a

[21] de Vaus D A (2002) *Surveys in Social Research*, 5th edition, Routledge.

probability sample through use of the Post Office Address File or PAF. Whilst not strictly a sample frame in itself, the PAF has good coverage and is reliable; it can be purchased, or samples commissioned through agencies for use in general surveys.

Surveys that are based on multi-stage cluster samples, samples drawn from the PAF or where the views of a random adult member of the household (rather than the pre-defined tenant or head of household) are required, should select the individual through a further procedure based on chance, not convenience. This could be a procedure based on birthday dates or the use of a Kish Grid. The Kish Grid or similar procedure should also be used to select a flat at an address where there is more than one dwelling[22].

It is important to remember that random sampling cannot be done with an inadequate sampling frame because the resulting sample will not be an accurate reflection of the population. To be adequate, sampling frames should be up-to-date before selecting the sample. They should include all population groups that the research is interested in – where there is likely to be systematic under-enumeration of particular groups of people, such lists should not be used for random sample selection. For example, certain sample frames systematically exclude particular service users, such as those who are not tenants, the homeless, those not registered to vote, young people and so on. Sampling frames should also be examined for inherent bias – there may be some underlying ordering to a sample frame that means that a certain type of person or property may occur at regular intervals throughout the listing. Such sample frames should be rearranged before use or simple random sampling rather than systematic sampling should be used.

Types of random samples

There are four main types of random or probability samples:

- simple random samples
- systematic samples
- stratified random samples
- multi-stage clustered samples.

Details of when to use these samples and how to obtain them can be found elsewhere[23].

Sample size

How big a sample should be depends on how accurate it needs to be and the degree to which diversity in the population on important variables for the research needs to be taken into account. Increasing the size of the sample is likely (though not guaranteed) to increase the accuracy with which it reflects the whole population. However, once a sample goes over approximately 1,000 people (or whatever unit is being sampled), increases in accuracy tend to slow

[22]See de Vaus (2002) for more information.
[23]See de Vaus (2002) for more information.

down. The costs of obtaining larger samples are not worth it in terms of the extra accuracy achieved. So, although it seems counter-intuitive, above a certain sample size it is the absolute size of the sample that is important, not whether the sample is a certain percentage of the overall population.

Another factor in decisions about sample size is that the size of the sample should be big enough to capture the anticipated diversity of responses to key variables in the research. For example, it may be anticipated that 70 per cent of respondents will say they are satisfied and 30 per cent will say they are dissatisfied. Because these 'splits' in response rates are difficult to assess in advance across a range of variables, it is best to play safe by determining sample size on the basis of the key variables for which there is likely to be the greatest diversity of responses.

Figure 4.3 shows the sample sizes that are needed to accommodate the anticipated response splits to key variables. Column one shows the percentage of sampling error at the 95 per cent confidence level. Sampling error is the difference between the sample and the population from which it is drawn and the confidence level of 95 per cent refers to the degree of confidence that there is in the generalisations that can be made on the basis of the sample. For example, if it was found that in a sample of 1,100, 82 per cent of the sample were satisfied with services, we could be 95 per cent confident that between 79–85 per cent of the population from which the sample was drawn are satisfied (that is, 82 per cent plus or minus three per cent). Note that this figure of three per cent is quoted from Figure 4.3 in relation to a sample of 1,100. The second column assumes that the anticipated variation within the population in relation to key characteristics of the study is such that there will be roughly a 50:50 split. The third column shows that sample sizes would be smaller for more homogenous samples.

Figure 4.3 Sample sizes required for various sampling errors at 95% confidence level (simple random sampling)

Sampling error %	Sample size – 50/50 split	Sample size – 30/70 split
1.0	10,000	9,600
1.5	4,500	
2.0	2,500	2,100
2.5	1,600	
3.0	1,100	933
3.5	816	
4.0	625	525
4.5	494	
5.0	400	336
5.5	330	
6.0	277	233
6.5	237	
7.0	204	171
7.5	178	
8.0	156	131
8.5	138	
9.0	123	104
9.5	110	
10.0	100	84

How to tell if the sample is biased

Discussions about sample size are based on the number of responses actually obtained from the sample rather than the selected sample number. The absence of certain members of the research population through non-response will reduce sample size and may bias the sample.

The response rate is an important statistic. It can indicate whether there is bias in the achieved sample. For example, if the selected sample number was 500 people and only 50 people responded, it is likely that this coverage of the population is not great enough to provide an accurate reflection of the diversity of opinions. So the achieved 10 per cent sample is likely to be a biased sample.

Response rates can only be calculated where there is a sample frame of all those with a chance of being selected for interview. Many sampling techniques that are not strictly probability samples do not use a sampling frame, so the sample is not chosen at random and therefore it cannot be known what proportion of those that have been selected have not responded.

Where no response rate is able to be calculated, the achieved sample should be compared against known characteristics of the population such as area, property type, age or gender to see whether some groups are over or under-represented in the final sample.

Details of response rates should be given wherever possible and there should be acknowledgement of any under or over representation and correction of bias by weighting of the responses in the analysis. Weighting is a way of adjusting the sample so that the sample profile on key variables reflects that of the population, by statistically increasing or decreasing the numbers of cases with particular characteristics. As a rule, only stable independent variables that do not change rapidly over time should be used for weighting purposes. For example, key variables based on the known distribution of properties or tenure breakdown are likely to be more stable and independent than variables based on service users' opinions.

Practice point

- Make sure that the technical details of sampling are included in reports provided by contractors, perhaps in a technical annex. This should cover sampling strategy, size, response rates, sampling errors and confidence levels. This is important information in assessing the quality of the achieved probability sample and hence the representativeness of the survey.

Random or probability sampling: checklist

√ If statistical representativeness is the goal of the survey ensure a random or probability sample is used.

√ Ensure that the sampling frame used is adequate.

√ Check that the size of sample is appropriate for the purposes of the survey and type of analysis of sub-groups required.

√ Ensure technical information about sampling has been provided.

√ Consider whether the achieved sample is biased and whether the response rate is typical of the type of survey.

√ Check for evidence of under or over representation of certain sub-groups or areas and whether this has been corrected in the analysis by the use of weights.

4.3.2 Non-random or non-probability samples

If generalising from the sample to the population is less important it is not always necessary to select a strictly statistically random sample. At other times, it may not be feasible if, for example, there is no sampling frame from which to select a sample. In these circumstances, surveys can be based on types of non-random samples.

Qualitative research samples

Qualitative research samples are usually non-random (non-probability) samples because most qualitative research is more concerned to generalise findings to theory development than to generalise findings to populations.

In qualitative research it is not just people who are sampled; time and contexts are sampled too. For example, it is important that people or events are researched at different times of the day and week so that inferences about what people do are not limited to what they do only on dayshifts or at weekends. Also, people behave differently in different settings so the research may require that a variety of settings be selected. However, depending on the research topic, it may not be possible to know the population in advance; sampling frames may not exist and it may not be possible to create them.

Types of non-random samples: quota sampling

Quota sampling aims to produce samples which reflect the broader population on some agreed criteria, without a random selection of cases. It is used widely in market research as it is quicker and cheaper than probability sampling but does not ensure absence of bias or allow any assessment of bias.

Quotas may reflect the geographic or property profile of the population from which the sample is drawn. Whilst not technically statistically representative, this is often adequate for most general survey purposes. Setting quotas requires reliable information about the distribution of properties or other variable used.

The use of some randomising procedure to select cases or addresses to include in the survey will reduce bias in the selection of exactly who to interview, rather than relying on who is available at the time of the survey. Instructing researchers to follow a random route within an area in order to select addresses for inclusion in a survey is also another way of reducing selection bias, although neither of these approaches will produce a strictly random sample.

Types of non-random sample: purposive sampling

Purposive sampling includes cases that are judged by the researcher to be typical of some category of interest to the research, such as recent service users. For surveys, purposive sampling is most likely to be of value for service-specific surveys rather than general surveys.

Flow sampling is a form of purposive sampling and may be appropriate for surveys or qualitative research with callers at a One-Stop Shop or customer service centre. There will be no sample frame or list available in advance for sampling from a flow of people and sampling and data collection happen simultaneously.

In any kind of purposive sampling, defining the population carefully will be important; for example in sampling a flow, you may wish to survey visits or visitors. The time at which the sample is chosen will also be important as the volume of callers or service requests may change during the course of a day and week.

Purposive samples can be taken at fixed times, or by counting and interviewing every nth caller or by using quotas. Each approach brings different degrees of bias and costs associated with having staff available to conduct interviews or distribute surveys or response cards.

Even if statistical representativeness is not the point of a survey, it will still be necessary to consider the range and source of responses to consider whether and how those who have responded are likely to differ from those that have not. If quotas have been used to select a sample, then responses should be compared against the original quotas, to see whether the rate of response differs. The overall response rate should also be assessed against typical responses for the type of survey such as postal or telephone. The absolute achieved numbers in the sub-groups used in the analysis are a useful pointer for judging the adequacy of the sample.

Types of non-random samples: snowball sampling

Snowball sampling is a type of purposive sampling. It involves identifying one or more people from the population being researched who can then identify other members of the population who, in turn can identify further members and so on.

In this way a substantial number of people can be identified and approached to take part in the research. Snowball sampling is also known as 'network sampling' and is particularly useful when it is difficult to identify members of a population as may be the case when researching hard-to-reach groups.

Types of non-random samples: opportunistic sampling

Opportunistic sampling is also known as 'convenience sampling' and involves choosing the nearest and most convenient people to act as questionnaire respondents or as interviewees. However, making selections purely on the basis of ease and convenience is poor research practice. Good research practice involves making selections on the basis of robust criteria related to the research topic and research implementation.

Opportunistic sampling is particularly useful for qualitative researchers working in a context where most people have knowledge about the research topic and are equally suitable as interviewees. However, it is highly undesirable for survey research because it is unknown whether selected respondents are representative of the population and, therefore, the research findings cannot be used to make generalisations about the wider population.

Types of non-random samples: theoretical sampling

Qualitative researchers are typically concerned with how people understand and make sense of things and with finding out about the 'meanings' things have for people. Because the concern is with meanings qualitative researchers need to think about the context of the research and the range of activities, processes, events, times and locations that they may need to study. Studying meanings is not usually linked to concerns about statistical representativeness of a population, it is more concerned with the processes involved in how people derive meanings and what these meanings are about. See the section on meaningful representation for a further explanation.

Qualitative researchers often undertake 'theoretical sampling' to select who and what they should study. The term 'theoretical' relates to the selection of what or whom to study based on developing analysis, ideas or theory. Issues of importance and people are sampled on the basis that they are 'cultural experts'. In theoretical sampling, data collection and analysis take place simultaneously; the developing analysis informs the researcher of what or whom they should study next.

Non-random or non-probability sampling: checklist

√ If statistical representativeness is the goal of the survey use a random sample.

√ If a sampling frame is unavailable or does not exist use a non-random sample.

√ Ensure researchers provide adequate technical information about sampling.

√ Consider whether events, time, locations and so on need to be sampled.

√ If opportunistic sampling is used, ensure there are justifiable reasons for its use that are related to the research topic and research implementation.

√ If members of a population are hard to identify snowball sampling will be useful.

4.3.3 When a sample may not be necessary

In small organisations or for locally focused surveys, it may not be necessary to sample and surveys can be based on a census of all members of the population.

It will often be desirable to promote the survey widely and encourage all people to give their views, perhaps publicising it through a newsletter. Depending on the context and purpose of the survey, it may be appropriate seek the views of all service users. In these cases, the additional expense of including everyone in the survey is likely to be worthwhile. The scope of the survey can be limited by defining a clear time period in which it will be conducted, so, for example, all those who have requested a repair in the last four weeks could be surveyed.

4.4 Qualitative methods

Qualitative methods include diverse approaches that seek to develop description, understanding and analysis of situations as experienced by those who are the focus of the research. Qualitative research enables both meaning and measurement to be developed. This guidance includes a number of approaches that can be used on their own or in combination with other qualitative or quantitative methods. Most participatory methods also use qualitative data.

Qualitative methods are less widely used and understood by social landlords than quantitative methods. Yet, they can provide important and useful forms of information about service quality. They are sometimes incorrectly dismissed as anecdotal, 'soft' or subjective, but arguably they deal with the 'hard' questions about what is significant to service users. The validity of qualitative approaches is discussed more fully in the section on representativeness.

Practice point

- There is scope for social landlords to make fuller use of a range of qualitative methods to gather views on service quality and provide a more in-depth and nuanced understanding of the experience of service users.

4.4.1 Qualitative in-depth interviews

In-depth interviews are an important qualitative technique. They are used as a way of gathering rich, detailed information and can be administered in a one-to-one or group situation.

Why would you use in-depth, unstructured interviews?

It is appropriate to use in-depth interviews when a deep understanding about peoples' experiences from their own point of view is required. They do not use a structured list of pre-prepared questions in a questionnaire format, although they might use a topic guide such as a list of themes or questions relevant to the research. In this way, in-depth interviewing can provide detailed information and insights about people's experiences that cannot be accessed through rigidly structured questionnaires. They can be used in conjunction with other research methods as a means of supplying additional or supporting data.

If your research involves understanding detailed complex matters that are difficult to quantify or anticipate in advance then in-depth interviews are likely to be a highly suitable method of data collection. Questionnaires will be unsuitable because their pre-formulated, standardised nature will not allow deep, complex detail to be captured. In-depth interviews are also commonly used when researching personal or sensitive issues and people's emotions and feelings. Often, interviewees find their emotions and feelings difficult to express particularly if the topic is sensitive. A skilled interviewer will be responsive to these difficulties and able to sensitively manage the interview so that the interviewee feels comfortable enough to talk openly and honestly about the topic.

Undertaking in-depth interviews with groups is addressed in the section on group interviews and focus groups.

The role of the interviewer

Because in-depth interviews are used to gather very detailed information they tend to emphasise the active role of the interviewee or 'informant'. The interviewer's role is to encourage the interviewee to speak freely in their own words about issues that are relevant and important to them. The interviewer may use an interview or topic guide, but the interviewer can reorder, reword and develop new questions to suit the interview context and the direction in which the interviewee is taking the interview. The main point about in-depth, unstructured interviews is that their flexibility enables the researcher to gain a much greater grasp of the details and nuances of the interviewee's perspective.

How to select a sample for in-depth interviews

Most qualitative interviews use non-probability sampling techniques or a process of sampling called theoretical sampling. Theoretical sampling is a process of selection of participants that is driven by research findings as they develop. The researcher simultaneously collects and analyses data and constantly compares data and its possible meanings by using the developing analysis to decide what data to collect next and from where to get that data. This means that the researcher not only selects people with relevant experience, but also selects relevant events, locations and times of day as necessary to collect relevant data.

It is not usual to undertake as many in-depth interviews as you would send out questionnaires in quantitative research, because the emphasis is on the quality of the data, rather than the quantity.

Ethical issues associated with in-depth interviews

As with all research techniques it is crucial that the in-depth interview is conducted in an ethical manner. The section on ethical research practice explains the main areas of ethical concerns.

Designing and conducting in-depth research interviews

The design of an in-depth interview needs to be based on a clear sense of the purpose, scope and use of the research, so that relevant questions can be formulated and the interview conducted to encourage full, detailed answers. This is a task that requires skill and experience and if there are no in-house staff with specialised experience it is probably best to use an external researcher. Detailed advice on the design and conduct of in-depth interviews is available elsewhere[24,25]. Issues related to care in the conduct of interviews are addressed in the section on skills for interviewing.

Analysing in-depth interview data

Analysis of in-depth interview data can be undertaken manually. This is usually done using a written transcription of the interview data and identifying themes and issues within the data. However, interviews can generate large amounts of information and the task of analysis of data can be complex and demanding. There are several computer packages available to manage the analysis of qualitative data such as NUD*IST, ATLAS/ti, NVivo and Ethnograph. Ideally analysis of this data should be conducted by the interviewer themselves. Again, more guidance on analysis is available elsewhere[26,27,28].

In-depth interviews: checklist

√ Ensure that in-depth interviews are appropriate for the research topic and the population to be researched.

[24] Lofland John and Lyn H Lofland, (1984) *Analyzing Social Settings: A Guide to Qualitative Observation and Analysis*, 2nd Ed Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Company

[25] Legard R Keegan J and Ward K, (2003) In-depth Interviews, in Ritchie J and Lewis J (eds) *Qualitative Research Practice*, Sage

[26] Lofland J and Lyn H Lofland, (1984) op cit

[27] Bryman A (2001), *Social Research Methods*, Oxford University Press

[28] See Ritchie J and Lewis J (2003) (eds) *Qualitative Research Practice*, Sage

√ Develop a topic guide or checklist rather than a series of structured questions.

√ Use a skilled and experienced interviewer to conduct the interview and if possible to analyse the data.

√ Ensure that the analysis of the data identifies the full range of themes of the interview and does not seek to quantify responses.

√ Report the conclusions to all key audiences in a clear and appropriate way without compromising the anonymity of participants.

√ Identify the implications of the research for service delivery and any further research and consultation needs.

Alternative and related approaches

- Group interviews and focus groups
- Using stories
- Action research

4.4.2 Group interviews and focus groups

In-depth qualitative interviews can be conducted with groups as well as individuals. Some groups may already be in existence. These can be used for qualitative research and consultation purposes and social housing organisations could make better use of existing groups for deliberate research and consultation purposes. Other groups may be specially convened for the purposes of the research.

Depending on the purpose of the research and consultation, the research topic and related themes may be quite specifically defined by the researcher. At other times, the topic and themes will be more open and flexible to enable the researcher to freely adapt questions in response to the issues brought up by the service users themselves.

What type of interview should be used?

The type of group interview conducted will depend on the combination of circumstances:

- the extent to which the topics and themes are focused and specific or open and flexible; and
- the availability of suitable pre-existing groups or the need to convene a group specifically for the purpose of research.

A focus group is an in-depth interview with a small group of people (perhaps 6-10) specially convened for the purpose of discussing a particular topic. Group members are specially selected and invited by the researcher on the basis that they have specific experience or knowledge about the topic. In a focus group, the emphasis is on ensuring that all parties have the opportunity to contribute to the discussion.

A group interview is more likely to be conducted with pre-existing groups and arranged to fit in with the normal meeting circumstances of the group. It is likely to be conducted in a more open and flexible way than a focus group and this has the advantage that the topic is likely to be more engaging because it can be shaped more readily by the concerns of the group members.

In a group interview, although the researcher is also concerned to ensure that all members of the group have the opportunity to speak, the researcher has more freedom to pursue a relevant or interesting theme with one or two group members.

The uses of group interviews and focus groups

Group interviews and focus groups are particularly useful for researching the views of numerically small groups whose views may be under-represented in general surveys, such as minority ethnic communities or young people.

These approaches can be used to enhance the quality of other research approaches, for example by assisting in the development of survey questionnaires, or they can be used to gather more detailed information about particular aspects that emerged as important during a survey.

However, in-depth group interviews may not be the most appropriate method if the research issues are sensitive and inappropriate for group discussions, if convening a focus group presents practical difficulties or if there are no suitable existing groups. In these circumstances individual in-depth interviews are likely to be more useful.

Practice point

- Group interviews and focus groups are valuable qualitative research approaches that can be used as a stand-alone method or to complement the use of other methods, such as surveys, by improving their design or deepening understanding of the issues identified.

How to design and conduct group interviews and focus groups

Designing and conducting group interviews and focus groups is similar to designing and conducting in-depth interviews. Detailed advice on design and conduct is available in the section on in-depth interviews and elsewhere[29,30].

[29]Bryman, A (2001), *Social Research Methods*, Oxford University Press
[30]Ritchie J and Lewis J (2003) (eds) *Qualitative Research Practice*, Sage

Sampling for group interviews and focus groups

Existing groups should be selected for use in research and consultation on the basis that they are likely to be able to provide useful and relevant perspectives and to be able to open up the topic in some way.

Focus group members should be identified and invited to participate on the basis that they have some knowledge and experience of the topic. The composition of focus groups should be considered so that full discussion and disclosure are not compromised. For example, it may be necessary to run separate groups for men and women, for different age groups or for people who already know each other, although a mix of people may open up an issue in a new way.

Focus group participants can be recruited from other research and consultation exercises, such as panels or surveys, as long as they have given permission to be re-contacted. Participants from 'hard-to-reach' groups can be identified through contact with community and voluntary groups or through snowball sampling techniques. However, care must be taken to avoid repeatedly using the same people who may put themselves forward and be more willing to participate in such exercises. It is usual to over-recruit members for focus groups because a major problem is 'no-shows' on the day.

How many group interviews or focus groups should be run?

Time and resources play a major part in how many group interviews and focus groups will be conducted, but sufficient groups should be run to allow a broad range of views to emerge and the views of important sub-groups of the population to be captured.

The importance of the issue can influence the number of groups that need to be run. For example, major policy reviews would warrant a more extensive programme of in-depth group interviews than would, say, an assessment of the design of a newsletter. One way to assess whether a sufficient number of groups have been run is when the researcher can fairly confidently predict what the next group is likely to say about the topic. This is an indication that the topic has been 'saturated' and it is unlikely that new information will be gathered by running further groups.

Analysing and reporting in-depth group data appropriately

The purpose of in-depth group interviews is to provide insights and a greater understanding of issues of importance to the particular group. In-depth group interviews are not intended to generate consensus or to provide statistical data from which generalisations can be made.

Data analysis can be conducted following the same principles as analysis of in-depth interview data. A range of perspectives should be included and information and conclusions should be reported in a clear and appropriate way without compromising the anonymity of participants. It is important to identify how the research will be used to make changes to service delivery and to report clearly on any further research and consultation needs.

Group interviews and focus groups: checklist

√ Ensure that in-depth group interviews are appropriate for the research topic and the type of service users.

√ Consider whether there are pre-existing groups that could usefully contribute to the research and consultation or whether it is necessary to convene new groups.

√ Consider the appropriate composition and number of focus groups that should be run to capture the likely diversity of perspectives across different groups of service users.

√ Use an experienced and independent facilitator.

√ Ensure that the analysis of the data identifies the full range of themes of the discussion, areas of agreement and difference and does not seek to quantify responses.

√ Report the conclusions to all key audiences in a clear and appropriate way without compromising the anonymity of participants.

√ Identify the implications of the research for service delivery and any further research needs.

Alternative and related approaches

- In-depth individual interviews
- Participatory methods
- Storydialogue

4.4.3 Using stories

The use of stories is a valuable approach to incorporating user or staff perspectives into the evaluation of services. They can be conducted on an individual or group basis.

Stories can challenge perceptions, provide new insights and help to shape deeper understanding of how service delivery is experienced by users and staff; in particular they can highlight issues around partnership working by illustrating how complex, cross-cutting services work in practice. They can provide strong motivating energy for change and reinforce the value given to the perspectives of the story tellers. The use of stories has many applications for social housing organisations and can be adapted to suit the particular context and to involve varying degrees of participation in the method; see for example storydialogue.

Think about the purpose of the stories

Using stories for research and consultation purposes differs from more familiar use of stories in everyday life. Stories are often dismissed as anecdotes, but this is a mistake as they provide valuable information about particular experience which would be overlooked in quantitative approaches. To ensure this, the approach should be more systematic and rigorous and used within an understanding of the overall intention or purpose for which the story is told. This will shape the process of data collection, analysis and the dissemination of the stories. Different stories are likely to emerge for different purposes. It may be appropriate to provide some structure for storytellers though issuing guidelines for stories or alternatively to be more open to whatever issues are important to the storytellers themselves.

The use of stories is a more human approach for any group of service users who may find that the use of surveys for example does not do justice to their experience. Stories may be a particularly useful approach with those who have difficulty with literacy, ability to read in English, sight or hearing problems. However, they can be used with any group of service users.

Stories may sometimes be used as a supplement to other approaches and may provide some 'colour' to reports largely based on quantitative data. This is a legitimate approach, but for some issues stories can be used as the main data collection method and can be analysed to provide rich insights and understandings. Stories may also be used in the dissemination process to get across the main issues from any research or consultation exercise to different audiences.

The purpose will influence the sampling procedures used. As in other qualitative approaches, sampling is more likely to be non-random and based on the selection of those who can provide valuable information on the issues of importance. The storytellers will be selected on the basis that they have experience which can be used to shed light on the issues.

Practice point

- Be clear about the purpose of the exercise and the intention with which the stories are gathered in order to ensure that the process is systematic, rigorous and conducted with due care and attention to the welfare of the storytellers.

Using stories of homelessness: South Lanarkshire Council

South Lanarkshire Council have used stories to get homelessness service user feedback. They used local statutory and voluntary sector homelessness services to identify and collect stories of their clients' experience of using homelessness services. The council provided clear guidance to the agencies in collecting the stories so that they focused on the issue. The agencies provided support to their clients and ensured that they were able to give their informed consent to the process. Guidance was provided on ensuring anonymity within the stories themselves to protect the identity of the story tellers.

The stories were produced in written form to be used at a local authority wide conference on homelessness in February 2005. The conference was attended by staff from the council, voluntary sector and other partner agencies that work with homeless people. At the conference the stories were read out by staff (where possible, those who had worked with them to write the stories). Those people who wrote their stories were also invited to attend the conference, and one did so.

The stories had a very powerful impact. They highlighted the complexity of the different services with which people had to engage and enabled the different agencies present to see how their role fitted into the bigger picture. The conference provided the impetus to improve the service and strengthened joint working between agencies. It recognised that the staff were doing a good job, but that there was a need to share more good practice.

Reflections on using stories

The South Lanarkshire experience provides some useful lessons. Where there is no culture of previous service user involvement this approach may well be profoundly challenging. There is a danger, as with other approaches, of raising unrealistic expectation of change. However, there is a chance that the process will be a way of opening up opportunities for change.

In the South Lanarkshire case, the stories did provide a valuable impetus for change in a situation where a new homelessness team had recently been established. The stories may have given a skewed impression of the service and some staff may have found this threatening. It is important to set ground rules that stress that the process is about hearing the story in order to improve services, rather than to allocate blame. One approach would be adopt an appreciative approach that briefs storytellers to consider something that worked well for them.

Analysis of stories

Stories can be used to simply provide case examples of experience on an individual basis, as in the South Lanarkshire example. The analysis of that experience was essentially undertaken through the conference discussion. However, stories could be analysed in a similar way to in-depth interview data. Where stories have been gathered on a group basis there is the advantage that they can be analysed collectively too and the interpretation and validation processes undertaken by the group. Participatory methods such as Photovoice and Storydialogue lend themselves well to this process.

Visual and other arts based methods are good triggers for stories and can also be used to present stories. For example, individual stories may be incorporated anonymously into a play. The use of video and DVD technology provides lots of opportunities to record and report this kind of material.

Using stories: checklist

√ Be clear about the purpose of collecting and analysing stories.

√ Consider the value of individual or group approaches and the degree of participation that can be incorporated into the process.

√ Be clear with all relevant parties about expectations of what the process can achieve and be prepared to be challenged.

√ Consider whether the brief should explicitly ask for stories where things have worked well, as well as more difficult issues.

√ Select people with the appropriate experience and ensure they understand how the stories are to be used.

√ Produce guidance for the process, detailing any prompts or guidelines for stories, including length, anonymity and other safeguards.

√ Use story facilitators if appropriate; this may depend on the sensitivities of the topic and the individuals and agencies involved.

√ Agree any appropriate support needs.

√ Consider how best to present the outcomes of the process.

√ Consider whether and how to actively engage the story tellers in the dissemination process.

√ Build on the momentum generated by the process to develop and implement action plans.

Alternative and related approaches to using stories

- Storydialogue
- System mapping
- Significant event analysis
- Using comments, compliments and complaints as feedback
- Photovoice
- Qualitative in-depth interviews

4.4.4 Participant observation

Participant observation is infrequently used in research and consultation in public services but it has a very long history in social science research. It has great potential to be used more, in particular, through making greater use of events and situations that are happening anyway and making better use of existing groups, for the explicit purpose of gathering views on service quality. In this way, participant observation may be part of an approach to making the most of what you already know.

Participant observation is a research approach that involves trying to get as close as possible to the perspectives of the people being researched by becoming involved in and sharing in the same situations as them. A key feature of participant observation is that data should be collected in ways that cause as little disruption as possible to the ordinary activities of the research context. Data collection involves a mix of observing what is happening, conducting informal in-depth interviews and interviewing people spontaneously by talking with them in a similar way to having an ordinary conversation. This may involve taking opportunities to talk as they arise. Although interviewing and observation are distinct methods of gathering information, in participant observation the researcher must often observe and talk with people simultaneously and interweave the activities of looking, seeing, watching, talking, asking and listening in much the same way as these activities are interwoven in ordinary life.

Collecting information in 'context' enables a greater possibility of understanding and relating to events and why people behave the way they do. For example, interviewing a member of staff or asking them to fill out a questionnaire about how they deal with complaints from service users will provide data that is an account of what the person says they do and that relies on their recall of relevant situations and circumstances. But these views may not be a sufficiently detailed or accurate reflection of what really happens during the course of this type of activity.

Directly observing and listening, being involved in events as they happen and being able to ask questions allows the researcher to get nearer to the perspectives of those involved because the researcher is sharing the same situations. Data from participant observation undertaken in real contexts is likely to be better quality and to reflect a closer view of what actually happens than data gathered from the artificially created and controlled environments of interviews or questionnaires.

Who should undertake observation?

The use of experienced external researchers is recommended to ensure objectivity and rigour in conducting participant observation. The difficulties of sustaining detachment from the activities being observed are particularly pronounced for those with prior knowledge and involvement in the particular context and this makes it difficult to use service users themselves as participant observers.

Sampling in participant observation

Research by participant observation is more concerned with understanding meanings and how people make sense of things in the research setting. Sampling is, therefore, less concerned about issues of representativeness and generalisability. Theoretical sampling based on snowball and opportunistic techniques are often used.

Accessing research settings

Gaining access to the research setting may be problematic. For example, gaining access through senior management may affect whether co-operation and trust is shown to the researcher by other departmental members or by service user organisations, particularly if they suspect the research is part of a management strategy that will be detrimental to their jobs or to service provision. It is important to think about issues such as these and, where necessary, to negotiate access and how best to introduce the researcher to people who will be part of the study.

Ethical conduct

Although participant observation can be conducted ‘covertly’ which refers to the participant observer concealing their identity as a researcher, this approach is full of ethical problems related to informed consent and deception and also to practical problems of recording information undetected. It is unlikely to be appropriate in research and consultation on service quality. Adopting an ‘overt’ approach is likely to be more appropriate and practical. This involves the researcher being open about their research role to those in the context and being open about what is to be researched, why it is being researched and how the findings will be used.

A general problem for all research is that people will alter their behaviour or not express their true opinions in the presence of the researcher. It is particularly important that the participant observer reassures people about why the research is taking place, what the research is about and how the research findings will be used. This is a matter of ethical research practice and is also likely to help build rapport and trust between the researcher and people involved in the study.

The participant observer must also be aware of research issues and conduct that may lead to bias. The key point of participant observation is to try to get as close as possible to the perspectives of those being researched and to try to interpret situations in the same way as the people being studied. The quality of the data is reliant upon the observational skills of the researcher and what the researcher chooses to observe.

As with all research, the researcher should be alert to their own values, what they choose to include and exclude in the research and their reasons for doing so and how these values and choices may affect the research. It is also important that whilst the participant observer needs to become involved with the people being studied, they also need to remain detached and to guard against the possibility of over-identifying with those being studied.

Recording and analysing data

Recording information largely depends on the research situation. Fieldnotes are generally kept and sometimes it is possible to use tape recorders and video recorders. Whichever methods of recording information are used it is important to be detailed and to devise a system that allows easy retrieval of information.

Analysis and interpretation of data is undertaken in a similar way to analysing and interpreting data gathered by in-depth interviews.

Detailed information about participant observation can be found elsewhere[31]. A fuller discussion about the use of observational methods in housing research is also available elsewhere[32].

Participant observation: checklist

√ Ensure that researchers are experienced to maximise objectivity and rigour in carrying out participant observation.

√ Ensure that sampling and selection strategies are appropriate for the context and that events, locations and times as well as people are considered.

√ Ensure that sampling and selection is guided by the developing analysis.

√ Anticipate and address possible barriers to access and barriers to the development of co-operation, rapport and trust.

√ Ensure that research participants are provided with a detailed and accurate account of what the research is about, why it is being undertaken and how the findings will be used.

√ Be aware of how the researcher's values and choices may affect the research.

√Ensure that information is recorded in detail and is easily retrievable.

[31]Burgess, R G, 1984, In the Field: *An Introduction to Field Research, London: Routledge*
[32]Robertson, D and McLaughlin (1996) *Looking into Housing: A Practical Guide to Housing Research, CIH*

Alternative and related approaches

- Qualitative in-depth interviews
- Action research

4.4.5 Significant event analysis (SEA)

SEA is an audit tool used primarily in health services. Its origins lie within Critical Incident Methodology developed in the USA for use with occupational groups[33]. This is one approach that could be used to encourage feedback from staff and it could also be used with groups of service users.

SEA is a way of sharing stories in a systematic way for service improvement. The technique works by bringing people together in a regular team meeting or occasional workshop to focus on particular incidents they consider significant, in order to learn and improve. These might be about successes and particularly satisfying experiences as well as problems. SEA is used mainly as an approach to self-evaluation with staff and can be adapted for work with service users or existing tenants' groups.

Participants, with the help of a facilitator, decide how to analyse the individual episodes, incidents or stories. The facilitator ensures that the analysis is undertaken in a systematic and detailed way. It is important to analyse both the particular detail of the event and also to draw out more general insights or lessons to discover what can be learnt about the overall quality of services and to identify what changes might lead to future improvements.

Evidence suggests that this more systematic approach can be easily built into the routines of an organisation, can lead to rapid change and can encourage a service user focus amongst staff. It can help to make hidden things explicit and so improve understanding. If used with a mixed group of staff and service users, it could highlight discrepancies within the wider system about what is supposed to happen and what actually happens in practice in service delivery.

Examples of significant events might include successful management of a crisis, violence to staff, inappropriate referrals, repeat homelessness and compliments and complaints. Although not focused solely on adverse events, it does acknowledge that even in such situations there is usually some part which is well managed and should be acknowledged.

Guidelines for undertaking SEA with professional teams based on work done within the NHS are detailed in Figure 4.4.

[33]See http://www.projects.ex.ac.uk/sigevent/

Figure 4.4 A step to step guide to significant event analysis

PRINCIPLES

- Involve the whole team
- Hold regular meetings to discuss events (both good and not so good)
- Focus on system improvement rather than the individual (develop a 'no blame' culture)

STEP 1

- Discuss types of event to record
- Develop team 'ground rules' for meetings and decide how best to facilitate the meeting as a team.
- Make date for first SEA meeting
- Collect events as they occur using a record book

STEP 2

- Collate events a week prior to the meeting
- Create an agenda recognising the priority of topics, availability of personnel, involvement of team members, sensitivity of topics and be flexible to add 'hot topics'

STEP 3

- Circulate agenda 48 hours prior to meeting
- At the meeting run through the recording sheet of the last meeting, in particular the action points
- Each new event is presented by the person(s) involved in the event and followed by a discussion. Discussion should focus on:
  - Positive aspects of service
  - Aspects needing improvement
  - Interface issues
  - Team issues
  - Summary
  - Recommendations and action

STEP 4

- As a team decide the possible outcome for events
  - Congratulations
  - Change recommended
  - No action required
  - Further evaluation/audit required
  - Further work required
- Record key points (event, discussion and decision, actions to be carried out and by whom)
- Set date and time of next meeting

Source: adapted from http://www.rdspc.org.uk

√ Choose appropriate events, both everyday and exceptional cases; contrasting what happens is a way of bringing out key learning points.

√ Do not determine in advance or to others what should be seen as significant – let participants decide.

√ Provide facilitation of meetings; make sure people stay focused on the task and do not get distracted.

√ Develop ground rules for the session; it should not be about apportioning blame.

√ Consider how this approach might be used with groups of service users and with mixed groups of service users and staff.

Alternative and related approaches

- Using stories
- Storydialogue
- System mapping
- Using comments, compliments and complaints as feedback
- Photovoice
- Qualitative in-depth interviews
- Participatory appraisal

4.4.6 Using comments, compliments and complaints as feedback

The Performance Standards expect that social housing organisations will ensure that service users are able to make complaints or challenge decisions and that they will be treated fairly when they do so and, where appropriate, receive effective redress. Inspectors are likely to criticise landlords that do not use complaints as a source of feedback from which to improve service delivery.

Practice point

- Complaints schemes should be used as a valuable source of service user feedback on service quality.

Complaint schemes tend to record formal complaints in which the service user is seeking explicit redress and of course, it is vital to regularly monitor and act on such complaints. However, many 'complaints' may go unrecorded, yet both formal and informal complaints and suggestions can be a valuable source of information about service users' views of service provision. They can be used alongside other data collection techniques to help assess performance, highlight areas of good practice and to help improve service quality and delivery. More detailed information can be collected to help identify patterns or causes of complaints in relation to geographical areas or service user characteristics.

It may be necessary to train staff to see informal 'complaints' as a valued source of learning and to record them consistently. It may also be necessary to allow time to investigate the substance of a 'complaint' (beyond the formal need to establish if redress is warranted) in order to understand what happened and to draw out the wider lessons.

If complaints are to be useful as a source of feedback it is likely that complaints systems will need to be reviewed to ensure clarity and consistency in recording and analysis. All complaints including informal ones should be recorded and classified appropriately across the organisation, although it will be important to ensure that this does not become too bureaucratic or burdensome for staff.

It may be helpful to consider what is actually meant by a complaint. For example, if service users request information but these requests can only be recorded as complaints, statistics reflecting the number of complaints received may be misleading.

To clarify and expand the value of these kinds of feedback systems it may be more accurate and helpful to consider three broad categories that are commonly known as the '3 Cs':

- comments: suggestions and ideas about services and service delivery; requests for information;

- compliments: comments expressing appreciation or acknowledging that something has been done well; and

- complaints: comments expressing dissatisfaction or informing that something has gone wrong and needs to be put right.

A system that also welcomes and records 'compliments' can be highly valuable. It is linked to the idea of being appreciative and finding what is working and why, as well as what is not. Compliments and acknowledgements of efforts can have a positive impact on staff morale and performance so it is important to consider how these comments can be fed back to staff.

Appropriate recording and classification enables analysis of the number of complaints and other types of comments and also enables trends or patterns to be monitored. Analysis of outcomes will also be valuable. Once such systems are in place, landlords should be able to gain useful intelligence about particular experiences of service delivery – either service failure or success – which may have wider implications for service design or contain valuable insights into the user experience.

It is important that service users are provided with accessible ways to put forward their feedback and there should also be appropriate access for speakers of other languages, people with disabilities and members of groups that are excluded, hard-to-reach or isolated.

Ethical research practice is a particular issue. Because 3Cs feedback is likely to be from a relatively small number of 'cases' or responses, there is the risk that parties involved could be easily identified so it is important to address issues of anonymity and confidentiality particularly, but not exclusively, in relation to complaints. Appropriate safeguards should be provided for both the complainant and staff or contractors. The point of using feedback in this way is not to allocate blame, but to draw out wider lessons and therefore the identity of the parties is not really the point.

The use of comments, compliments and complaints systems as a source of feedback should be treated like any other approach to research and consultation; regular reporting to both service users, in-house staff and contractors (where relevant) should be provided and should encourage future input.

Using comments, compliments and complaints as feedback: checklist

√ Review existing complaints schemes to ensure clarity and consistency in recording and analysis.

√ Ensure that both formal and informal complaints are recorded.

√ Consider the definition of a 'complaint' and whether the use of different categories, such as the '3 Cs', would provide more useful, actionable information.

√ Be appreciative: be open to compliments and convey them to staff.

√ Monitor and report on feedback on a regular basis, including the analysis of trends and patterns in notification of comments, compliments and complaints and outcomes and use the information to improve services where necessary.

√ Consider ethical safeguards to ensure anonymity and confidentiality where appropriate.

√ Consider the need for training staff to value all kinds of feedback as a source of learning rather than to allocate blame.

√ Investigate the substance of a complaint more fully in order to understand what happened and to draw out the wider lessons.

Alternative and related approaches

- Using existing information
- Using stories
- Mystery shopping
- Significant event analysis
- System mapping

4.5 Participatory techniques

There are a range of participatory techniques that can be adapted to gather service users' views. A full account is beyond the scope of this guidance; other guidance is available in the Scottish Parliament Participation Handbook[34]. A few of the most relevant techniques are outlined here.

Practice point

- There is scope to make much better and more active use of more participatory approaches to research and consultation. In many instances, this is likely to enhance the quality and validity of the data collected and promote greater understanding of the views and variety of perspectives of service users.

Many participatory approaches operate on a self-selecting basis. Statistical representation is not a goal. Meaningful or participatory representativeness is more important. One of the great strengths of participatory methods is that those that take part do have an interest in the issue and usually some useful experience on which to draw.

It is important that every effort is made to ensure that the research and consultation is as inclusive is possible. It is also important to ensure that all people that attend events have the opportunity to take a full part in the proceedings.

[34] Scottish Parliament (2004) Participation Handbook, Participation Services

4.5.1 Citizens' and other juries

Citizens' Juries are often confused with Customer Panels although they differ from Panels in important ways.

Juries are a small group of non-specialists who meet over a period of time to examine an issue of public significance. The Jury will deliberate on evidence presented to them over a number of days. Whilst they are similar in size to focus groups, their purpose is different; their role is to make suggestions or recommendations and potentially also to monitor the implementation process.

When Juries should be used

Juries are best used for complex or contentious issues where there is a clearly defined question on which the Jury can make clear and actionable recommendations. Citizens' Juries are distinct from other methods of qualitative research and consultation and fuller guidance is available elsewhere[35,36].

What's the difference between forums and juries?

Forums are similar to Juries in that they are a group of people that meets periodically, to deliberate on issues and provide feedback on specific services, plans or proposals. Like Juries they may be small, but should still reflect the

[35] See http://www.juryworld.com
[36] *Teach yourself Citizens Juries* (2003), PEALS, University of Newcastle

profile of the wider population of interest. They may be a more appropriate vehicle for establishing an on-going dialogue with regular service users. Juries usually hear a range of evidence from invited ‘witnesses’ who have some knowledge or expertise of the issues under scrutiny.

Forums may be run in a similar way to Juries, using a facilitator and seeking to reflect a range of views rather than establish consensus. The choice of whether to use a Forum or a Jury may depend on the political salience of the issue, the scope for allowing the wider community to define the focus of the issue and hence the likely interest and commitment to the process from amongst the community.

Who should be on the Jury?

Juries work on the basis of participatory representativeness rather than statistical representativeness. The Jury should reflect the profile of the wider group that it is drawn from, perhaps in terms of the demographic, socio-economic and minority ethnic profile of the wider population.

This may involve establishing quotas for Jury membership based on the known profile of the wider population. Then the selection procedure may use some of the same sampling techniques as for other methods, perhaps drawing from a Panel, previous survey, contact with community groups or from a sampling frame such as the Electoral Register. The limitations of each of these approaches should be considered. The precise sampling method for Jury members will depend on the issue; it may be important to have a more purposive sample, such as older people, young people or users of particular services. It is particularly important to avoid inviting the same people and it may be useful to insist that all members are ‘first-time’ jurors, to ensure a range of views are heard and enhance the credibility of the process. To encourage recruitment from as broad a range of backgrounds as possible, it may be important to offer some forms of incentives such as honorarium payments and payments for childcare, travel and subsistence.

A useful approach is to establish an Oversight Panel to advise on the recruitment of the Jury and the selection of witnesses. The panel is composed of a diverse range of people, drawn from a wide range of organisations and backgrounds, recruited to ensure a fair and competent Jury process.

How does a Jury work?

Juries are time consuming and resource intensive. It will be important to allow the members to have sufficient time for a full deliberation of the issue under investigation and to interrogate witnesses themselves.

Juries may require the assistance of a facilitator or advisor to ensure they are able to complete their business to the agreed timetable. Appropriate accessible facilities should be provided to ensure there are no barriers to participation.

How participatory should the Jury process be?

The degree of participation in the Citizens' Jury process can be quite varied. A Jury could be run as a more fully participatory and empowering process than many conventional approaches to research and consultation.

The scope of the inquiry should be made clear to the Jury but it should not be too narrowly defined or prescriptive. Jurors hear from a variety of witnesses and should be able to discuss as broad or narrow a range of issues as they see fit. Whilst Juries are expected to develop a set of conclusions or 'visions' for the future, this need not be unanimous. Consensus is less important than allowing the full diversity of opinions on a topic to emerge.

Rather than simply expecting the Citizens' Jury to deliver a verdict as a legal jury would, Citizens' Juries can be designed so that members are involved in both the delivery of their recommendations and in the on-going work to ensure that their conclusions are implemented. Juries can be run as more grassroots, 'do-it-your-self' processes designed by communities themselves.

However the conclusions of the Jury are reported, they should include any different perspectives that may have emerged. This should be reported in a clear and appropriate way without compromising the anonymity of participants, unless they give their consent.

The implications of the research for service delivery should be identified and acted on. Jury members, wider service users and other key audiences should be informed of the actions taken as a result of the process. Any further research needs should also be identified.

Citizens' Juries – Blackburn Citizens' Jury

In spring 2004 the Joseph Rowntree sponsored Blackburn Citizens' Jury was launched. Invitations were sent to 5,000 local people from a number of selected wards to join the jury. 180 people responded. An oversight panel of local organisations was formed to check the rigour of the process.

The Oversight Panel selected 20 jurors' names. Quotas of groups that might otherwise be under represented were chosen:

- approximately equal numbers of men and women
- eight people from minority ethnic communities
- four or five people from each of the five age categories
- at least one disabled person
- two people not necessarily registered to vote.

The jurors attended a day workshop at which they debated which single issue was the most important affecting the quality of life in Blackburn. They chose 'the role of police in tackling under age abuse of drugs and drink'. The 20 jurors then met over a period of four weeks to question and listen to a number of 'expert witnesses' selected by the oversight panel to present different viewpoints on the issue. At the end of this period jurors produced a list of recommendations which were launched a couple of days before the local elections.

The Jurors continued to meet after the formal process had ended to ensure the implementation of the recommendations.

For more information see http://www.juryworld.com

Citizens' Juries: checklist

√ Consider whether the topic lends itself well to the deliberative approach of a Citizens' Jury, but don't be prescriptive about the precise scope of the Jury process.

√ Consider convening an Oversight Panel to oversee the Jury process.

√ Ensure the participatory representativeness of the Jury and make appropriate provisions to facilitate the full participation of Jury members.

√ Don't rush the process; ensure there is sufficient time and resources to ensure full deliberation of the issues.

√ Recruit a facilitator or advisor to assist the Jury, ensure the fullest participation amongst the Jury members and keep the process to the timetable.

√ Don't push for consensus to be reached and make sure the full diversity of perspectives is able to be aired.

√ Ensure the conclusions are reported in a clear and appropriate way to all key audiences, including the Jury itself, without compromising the anonymity of participants.

√ Identify the implications of the Jury process for service delivery and develop a plan of action to implement the recommendations.

√ Consider whether the Jury should continue to meet to oversee the implementation process.

√ Identify any further issues or research needs.

Alternative and related approaches

- Participatory techniques
- Group interviews and focus groups

4.5.2 Public meetings, workshops and conferences

Public meetings, workshops and conferences have a role in both tenant participation and research and consultation processes; however, organisations should not rely on such events as a sole source of information of service users' views but use them as part of a wider strategic approach to research and consultation. Analysis, reporting and action based on public events may be neglected as they tend to be seen more as a consultative approach, rather than a research tool.

Public events may be small scale and locally focused or larger scale organisation wide events. It is important that there is a clear and agreed purpose so that participants are aware of what changes in services may be realistically expected as a result of the event.

In research terms, they may be most useful in understanding the key issues of concern to service users and help to focus the design of other approaches. They may also be useful to publicise the results of research and consultation and to help devise recommendations for action that service users wish to see.

Practice point

- There is scope to make much better and more active use of public events for a variety of research and consultation purposes and to encourage more participatory approaches to the way such events are run.

Public events may be run in a number of ways. It is important to consider the overall purpose of the event and plan the way that it is run appropriately to achieve the desired level of participation. The degree to which the agenda for the meeting or conference is decided in advance by the landlord may influence interest in attending the event and the way it can be run. There is scope to run large-scale events in a number of ways that encourage participation and empowerment, for example by using Open Space and System Mapping.

All events should be held at suitable times and in venues that are accessible, safe and culturally appropriate. It may be necessary to provide transport for people or to reimburse their costs. The provision of interpreters, signers and induction loops may also be necessary.

It may be important to hold a series of events to maximise opportunities for participation. Publicity needs to be targeted to appeal to a range of participants and provision should be made to ensure that all parties receive it. Fuller guidance on organising inclusive consultation events is available from the Scottish Executive and guidance on successful tenant participation is available from Communities Scotland[37, 38]. Further practical suggestions on how to seek collective views are available in the Scottish Parliament Participation Handbook with a focus on increasing interaction and creating better dialogue through small and large group methods[39].

Public meetings, workshops and conferences; checklist

√ Ensure that public meetings or conferences are used in conjunction with other methods.

√ Ensure that a range of events is arranged to reflect the likely level of interest across different locations and groups.

√ Distribute targeted publicity appropriately and widely; promote participation by encouraging staff to talk to people about the events.

√ Make sure that meetings are held at suitable times and in venues that are accessible, safe and culturally appropriate.

√ If possible, take the meeting to where people are rather than expecting people to come to you. Consider transport needs and costs.

√ Make provision for interpreters, signers and induction loops as appropriate and practicable.

√ Consider how the meeting or event is to be run. If necessary, recruit a facilitator.

√ Ensure maximum participation in the proceedings of the meeting itself by using suitable participatory methods.

√ Ensure that the discussion of the meeting is recorded in notes or on tape so that a full analysis of the issues discussed can be undertaken.

√ As far as possible, any conclusions arising from the meeting should be validated through open discussion at the meeting itself.

√ Ensure that the implications of the discussion for service delivery are identified, reported to all key audiences and acted on.

[37] *Consultation Good Practice Guide*, 2004, Scottish Executive
[38] *Guide to Successful Tenant Participation*, October 2005, Communities Scotland
[39] Scottish Parliament (2004) *Participation Handbook*, Participation Services

√ Identify any further research and consultative needs.

Alternative and related approaches

- Storydialogue
- Open Space

4.5.3 Participatory Appraisal

Participatory Appraisal (PA) is a family of approaches and methods that enable people to present, share and analyse their knowledge and to allow them to plan and take action from their findings. The basis of the approach is that the experience of local people, their views and priorities should be the starting point for any local planning and action. Many PA methods are visual and create different options for the degree of participation that people wish to engage in. PA approaches can be used in meetings, with groups or individuals.

Common features of PA are:

- use of visual methods – using diagrams and pictures to aid analysis and discussion;
- deliberate promotion of discussion;
- mapping exercises – including community maps, body (or personal) maps which visually represent a theme in a persons' life;
- comparisons – discussion of contrast and commonality, seeking diversity;
- charting change over time – for example, charting timelines;
- seeking linkages and relationships – using tools that help analyse cause and effect, the impact of actions and the relationships between people, institutions and actions; and
- agreeing priorities – ranking and scoring exercises.

PA methods can be easily adapted to suit the needs of the particular situation or target group with which they are used.

As with all research and consultation methods, PA can be used simply as an effective way to gather data, particularly from excluded and hard to reach groups. However, the great value of PA is as an approach to encouraging participation and for making research and consultation as inclusive as possible[40].

[40] *Have you been PA'd? Using Participatory Appraisal to shape local services*, Oxfam, June 2003 available at: www.oxfamgb.org; Pretty J N et al *Participatory Learning and Action,* A Trainers' Guide, IIED, 1995

Participatory appraisal methods - Edinburgh Youth Social Inclusion Partnership

The Edinburgh Youth SIP Action Research Handbook provides a compendium of good examples of the adaptability of various 'PA' type approaches for use with young people.

This includes personal maps, diaries, board games, quizzes, rating games, flow charts, role play, letters and postcards, flash card, consequences, list and captions which can be used in individual or group settings.

See www.youthinclusion.org

Participatory Appraisal: checklist

√ Consider whether the topic lends itself well to a PA approach. Too prescriptive a focus may limit the value of the approach.

√ Be clear about expectations of what the process can achieve.

√ Be prepared to be challenged as an organisation.

√ Ensure that every effort is made to provide full opportunities for participation for all sections of the community or group which is the focus of the research.

√ Use a range of PA methods, appropriately adapted for different groups. Take some risks with more creative approaches.

√ Don't rush the process; ensure there is sufficient time and resources to maximise full and active engagement in the issues.

√ Recruit a facilitator or advisor to ensure the fullest participation and keep the process to the timetable.

√ Don't push for consensus to be reached and make sure the full diversity of perspectives is able to be aired.

√ Consider how best to present the conclusions and the scope for active dissemination by the participants.

√ Involve participants in the development and monitoring of action plans based on PA processes.

Alternative and related approaches

- Participatory techniques
- Photovoice

4.5.4 Photovoice

Photovoice provides cameras to community members to document their experience. This participatory approach enables people to record and reflect their community's strengths and problems. It can be used to promote dialogue about important issues through group discussion of the photographs and the visual material can be used as a way of engaging with policymakers and practitioners. Fuller information is available elsewhere[41].

Photovoice is based on the premise that what experts think is important may not match what people at the grassroots think is important. This can be useful for highlighting discrepancies in assumptions and for engaging with hard to reach groups.

This is a very flexible approach that can be adapted to specific purposes such as needs assessment, community mapping and service evaluation. It can be used with different groups and communities on a range of distinct issues relevant to public service delivery by social housing organisations.

The stages of Photovoice include:

- conceptualising the problem
- defining broader goals and objectives
- recruiting policy makers as the audience for Photovoice findings
- training the trainers
- conducting Photovoice training
- devising the initial theme(s) for taking pictures
- taking pictures
- facilitating group discussion
- critical reflection and dialogue
- selecting photographs for discussion
- contextualising and storytelling
- codifying issues, themes, and theories
- documenting the stories
- reaching policy makers, media and others who may be mobilised to create change.

Photovoice: checklist

√ Aim for maximum participation in decision making at every stage of the Photovoice process.

√ Be clear about expectations of what the process can achieve.

√ Be prepared to be challenged as an organisation.

√ Ensure that every effort is made to provide full opportunities for participation in the process for all sections of the community or group which is the focus of the research.

[41] See http://www.photovoice.com

√ Don't rush the process; ensure there is sufficient time and resources to ensure full and active engagement in the issues.

√ Recruit a facilitator or advisor to ensure the fullest participation and keep the process to the timetable.

√ Use visual methods in presentation of the conclusions and actively engage the participants in the dissemination process.

√ Involve participants in the development and monitoring of action plans based on Photovoice.

Alternative and related approaches

- Using stories
- Storydialogue
- Participatory appraisal

4.5.5 Storydialogue

Storydialogue is a way of sharing and analysing stories in a systematic way. Fuller details about the process and how it works are available elsewhere[42].

Storydialogue is a useful tool that has many applications. It can be used in planning new policies and programmes, to enable sharing of experiences and ideas amongst staff and with service users and is a useful, participatory technique which can bring variety to the research and consultation process.

How does it work?

The storydialogue process requires a facilitator for the whole process and sufficient facilitators to run the required number of story groups. It will usually be structured as a day event, although there are some preparation tasks that are completed in advance.

The first task undertaken in advance is to develop a 'generative' theme. This is a theme that generates animated discussed and is usually one that touches on some of the tensions of professional practice, service delivery or community activity and how decisions and choices are made. This can be a challenging process for the organisation convening the event and those that take part. The theme is decided in advance by the facilitator after initial discussions amongst those to be involved in the process. It is important to ensure that the right people are part of the storydialogue process. They should have some experience relevant to the generative theme and be prepared to enter into a process of constructive dialogue around that theme.

[42] *Learning from Stories, a method for learning from communities*, People for Action, 2003 www.pfanet.org.uk

Storydialogue – People for Action

People for Action are a network of housing and regeneration organisations, based in Birmingham. They have adapted the storydialogue method and used it in workshops. These showed that storydialogue is highly relevant to the day-to-day work of housing organisations.

- It is a useful tool for turning experience into theory as the basis for new policies and programmes.
- It allows sharing of experiences and ideas amongst staff.
- It can bring staff and service users together to share and compare experiences of service delivery.
- To help communities share knowledge and information and to find out about a place and the people that live there.
- To influence decision-makers and service managers.
- As a useful alternative to surveys or meetings to learn about service users' experience and opinions.
- To add variety and fun to consultation processes in a participatory and respectful way.
- A way of delivering constructive criticism, rather than apportioning blame.
- A technique for aiding communication and motivation.
- To develop the skills of active listening as part of the foundation of successful research and consultation processes.

See www.pfanet.org.uk

A small number of stories are selected in advance and 'storytellers' briefed about their role. On the day of the event, the process then works through a process of telling the stories in turn in a group format. Usually groups are made up of between seven and ten people and each group hears two stories. At the beginning, the story groups agree norms and standards for conduct, such as being critical, caring and confidential.

The process of hearing the stories is a structured and timed process of dialogue which allows for further questioning, reflection, and analysis of the themes within the stories. Group members each take notes during the process and one acts as a timekeeper. Whilst this process can be organised and timed to suit the particular circumstances, in general, it proceeds as follows:

- storytelling in story groups;
- reflection circle – a quick, immediate response to the story from each member of the group;
- structured dialogue – based around four types of questions:
    - What? (description)
    - Why? (explanation)

- So what? (synthesis)
- Now what? (action);

- development of insight cards – each member of the group writes a few of their insights (or 'ahas') down to share with the rest of the group. These are written on A5 paper so that they can be spread out on a table and read easily by every one else;
- devising categories – a collective process of analysing and sorting insight cards to identify themes;
- reporting back to a plenary of all story groups; and
- discussion of how best to present the outcomes of the process, engagement of participants in the dissemination process and in monitoring of any action plans agreed.

In this way the process moves from the particular to the general through developing 'insight cards' which distill key lessons from the story. The end result generates lessons learnt in collaboration about best practice.

The method is used to help practitioners evaluate their work, gain insights into their experiences and shape future practice. It has many applications for social housing organisations and can be adapted to suit the particular context.

Storydialogue: checklist

√ Take time to explore the 'generative theme' that is likely to engage and energise people willing to share their stories.

√ Recruit facilitators to oversee the process and steer each story group.

√ Ensure that the right people are part of the storydialogue process.

√ Adapt the process to suit the context and constraints in which you are working including agreeing norms and standards for conduct.

√ Consider how best to present the outcomes of the process and actively engage the participants in the dissemination process.

√ Involve participants in the development and monitoring of action plans based on Storydialogue.

Alternative and related approaches

- Using stories

- Using comments, compliments and complaints as feedback

- Significant event analysis

4.5.6 Open Space Technology (OST)

Open Space Technology is an engaging and enjoyable way to run large group meetings on complex and important issues where there is likely to be diversity of opinions[43]. Open Space can be used at a one day workshop, a longer conference or in a regular meeting. Fuller information is available elsewhere[44].

Every issue of concern to anyone that attends will at least be on the table for discussion. A parallel series of workshops may happen on issues identified as being priorities by those present. Participants decide which sessions they wish to attend and are able to host their own session and invite others to attend. Workshops develop a list of actions required which are all reported in an overall document of the event.

Although the overall event requires facilitation, this is not about imposing a structure and control over what happens. This can be quite challenging for some organisations and sponsors. Once the initial principles have been outlined and the practical arrangements made the event is largely self-managing.

Open Space works on four principles.

- Whoever comes are the right people – the people with the energy and commitment are the ones who will give up their time to work on an idea. Focus on who is there, rather than who is not.

- Whatever happens is the only thing that could have – this is about letting go of control, allowing in surprise and opening up to real learning, drawing on those 'experts' who are present.

- When it starts is the right time – don't wait for some specific person to arrive; begin with whoever is drawn to the discussion.

- When it's over, it's over – if the task takes less time than you thought, move onto something else. Otherwise, if it is deeply absorbing, continue until it's finished.

Open Space also has one law, 'the law of two feet', which says that if you feel you are neither learning from nor contributing to a discussion, you are required to get up and move to another discussion, without waiting for the group to complete its conversation, so that your fresh insights and creative thoughts can be used elsewhere.

Open Space is one of a number of large group processes some of which may be more applicable[45].

[43]Owen Harrison, with Stadler A (1999) *Open Space Technology* in Holman P and Devane T *The Change Handbook - Group Methods for Changing the Future*, Berrett-Koehler

[44]See http://www.openspaceworld.org

[45]See Holman P and Devane (1999) T, *The Change Handbook – Group Methods for Changing the Future*, Berrett-Koehler especially Part IV Comparative Matrix

Open Space: checklist

√ Be sure that Open Space is the best approach given the circumstances in which you are working.

√ Agree a theme and commit sufficient resources to the event.

√ Ensure that you make every effort to encourage a wide range of people to attend and to make it a real possibility for them.

√ Find a facilitator or convener.

√ Ensure that the space created is one in which people feel safe and are able to participate fully.

√ Be prepared to believe in people, to trust them and to acknowledge that in all probability, they are the true experts about what needs to be done.

√ Give up on any intention to control events and be prepared for whatever happens.

√ Build quickly on what comes out of the event so as not to lose momentum.

Alternative and related approaches

- Public meetings, workshops and conferences

4.5.7 System mapping

System mapping is a way of looking at what really happens in public service delivery, rather than what's supposed to happen[46]. It is primarily about trying to see where you can improve your service delivery and involves all the people who are part of service delivery processes, including the service users themselves. Whilst it is similar to process mapping which produces flow charts of procedures or stages in service delivery[47], system mapping works slightly differently in that it will also involve service users.

Where there is an identified issue, such as the allocation process or decanting due to major works, system mapping can be used. The process should be used with a group of people all of whom have some experience of the issue under question. It would start with a facilitator describing to the group an archetypal situation based on what is supposed to happen in these circumstances. All participants who have experience of this process are asked to contribute their real-life experience of what actually happens in these types of situations.

The many different possibilities are 'mapped' in someway, perhaps through a flow chart or spider diagram. In this way, the realities of what actually happens when the procedures are implemented are illuminated for all parties. The numbers of crucial links in a chain of tasks or events will be shown and assumptions highlighted about who will do what and when. Problems of co-ordination and failure to deliver at the right time in the process reveal the links between different bits of the system. By working with all parties within the system, the connections, communication links, delays and the many uncertainties involved are revealed to all.

This process can raise a number of challenging questions. Participants in the process are likely to begin to question why things are done in the way that they are and whether they can be done differently. These approaches can lead to real breakthroughs in perspectives and the use of language. It is possible to shift from a focus on 'solving a problem' (such as reducing void periods) to generating the possibility that this could be a positive experience for the service user (making moving home quick and easy). This reframes the issue from a problem to be solved where blame for difficulties can be shifted to someone else in the system. Instead, the issue can be turned on its head and the focus shifted to the service user experience or those of other departmental staff. System mapping can help to create an understanding of the need for organisations, staff and service users to work together to achieve a desired outcome.

System mapping: checklist

√ Agree a focus on specific processes.

√ Ensure there is management commitment to the exercise.

[46] Pratt J, Gordon P and Plamping D (2005) *Working Whole Systems: putting theory into practice in organisations* (2nd edition) Oxford, Radcliffe Press

[47] *The map to success - using process mapping to improve performance*, Audit Scotland, May 2000

√ Ensure that all those involved know what system mapping is about and why it is being undertaken.
√ Make sure you involve the right people. This might include those with authority to make changes to the processes; those with operational roles in the process being mapped; those from other teams or departments that supply some input or resources to the process; those who are reliant on the output from the process for their own work and a number of the ultimate customers or service users.

√ Ensure that you make every effort to encourage a wide range of people who are part of that 'system' to attend and to make it a real possibility for them.

√ Find a facilitator or convenor.

√ Ensure that the space created is one in which people feel safe and are able to participate fully.

√ Produce some visual representation of the process through a flowcharts, map or diagram.

√ Be prepared to make immediate small changes to processes to bring immediate benefits and encourage momentum for further system mapping events.

Alternative and related approaches

- Action research
- Significant event analysis
- Using comments, compliments and complaints
- Storydialogue

Section 5
Resources

5.1 *Useful websites*

This should not be seen as an exhaustive list, but includes websites providing further material on some of the topics covered in the guidance

Policy and practice background

Communities Scotland	**www.comm**
Housing Corporation	**www.housi**
Local Government Association	**www.lga.gov.uk**
Scottish Executive	**www.scotland.gov.uk**

Research and consultation guidance

Action Research	**www.bath.ac.uk**
Citizens' Juries	**www.juryworld.com**
The Consultation Institute	**www.consultationinstitute.org**
Open Space Technology	**www.openspaceworld.org**
Participatory Appraisal	**www.oxfamgb.org/ukpp**
Photovoice	**www.photovoice.com**
Scottish Parliament	**www.scottish.parliament.uk**
Storydialogue – People for Action	**www.pfanet.org.uk**
West Michigan University – utilisation focused evaluation	**www.wmich.edu**
Whole Systems working	**www.wholesystems.co.uk**

Ethical practice, quality assurance and Freedom of Information

British Market Research Association	**www.bmra.org.uk**
Market Research Society	**www.mrs.org.uk**
Information Commissioner's Office	**www.informationcommissioner.gov.uk**
Scottish Association of Black Researchers	**www.sabreuk.org**
Social Research Association	**www.the-sra.org.uk**
British Sociological Association	**www.britsoc.co.uk**
UK Evaluation Society	**www.evaluation.org.uk**

5.2 Publications

Policy and practice background

Performance Standards for social landlords and homelessness functions, COSLA, Communities Scotland, SFHA, November 2001.

A Good Practice Framework for Tenant Participation in Scotland, Ilene Campbell and John Flint, Communities Scotland Research Report 43, September 2004.

Guide to Successful Tenant Participation, Communities Scotland, October 2005.

Key Themes from Inspections – Tenant Participation, Communities Scotland, August 2005.

National Standards for Community Engagement, Communities Scotland, 2005.

Customer and Citizen Focused Public Services, Scottish Executive Central Research Unit, Stevenson, R and Gibson, P, 2002.

Performance Management in Local Authority Housing Services: an Empirical Review, SHBVN and Communities Scotland, Pawson, H et al 2004.

Good practice guidance

Consultation Good Practice Guide, Scottish Executive 2004.

Participation Handbook, Participation Services, Scottish Parliament 2004.

Performance Management in Housing: A Good Practice Guide, SHBVN and Communities Scotland, Currie, A and Currie, H, 2005.

Quality and Customer Focus: Good Practice Briefing No. 19 CIH, Chartered Institute of Housing, 2000.

Housing Management Standards Manual Version 2.7 CIH, Chartered Institute of Housing, 2003.

Research and consultation guidance

Quality and Qualitative Evaluation: A framework for assessing research evidence, Liz Spencer et al, Cabinet Office, 2003.

Public Service Reform, Measuring and Understanding Customer Satisfaction, MORI, 2002.

Understanding Research Methods for Social Policy and Practice, Saul Becker and Alan Bryman (eds) Bristol: The Polity Press, 2004.

Appreciative inquiry: asking the right questions, Learning Point 2, Scottish Centre for Regeneration, February 2005.

Surveys in Social Research, de Vaus, D.A. 5th edition, Routledge, 2002.

Analyzing Social Settings: A Guide to Qualitative Observation and Analysis, Lofland, John and Lyn H Lofland 2nd Ed, Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1984.

Qualitative Research Practice – A Guide for Social Science Students and Researchers, Ritchie, J and Lewis, J (eds), Sage, 2003.

Social Research Methods, Oxford University Press, Bryman, A 2001.

In the Field: An Introduction to Field Research, Burgess, R G, London: Routledge. 1984.

Have you been PA'd? Using Participatory Appraisal to shape local services, Oxfam, June 2003.

Participatory Learning and Action, A Trainers Guide, Pretty, J N et al, IIED, 1995.

Learning from Stories, a method for learning from communities, People for Action, 2003.

Open Space Technology, Owen, Harrison, with Stadler, A in Holman, P and Devane, T, The Change Handbook – Group Methods for Changing the Future, Berrett-Koehler, 1999.

Working Whole Systems: putting theory into practice in organisations, Pratt J, Gordon P and Plamping D, 2nd edition, Oxford, Radcliffe Press, 2005.

The map to success – using process mapping to improve performance, Audit Scotland, May 2000.

Can't get no satisfaction? Using a gap approach to measure service quality, Accounts Commission, 1999.

Listen Up! Effective Community Consultation, Audit Commission 1999.

Housing – Improving services through resident involvement, Audit Commission and Housing Corporation, Management Handbook, 2004.

Customer Involvement: Opportunities for Learning from the Private Sector? Office for Public Management, The Housing Corporation, 2002.

Feeling the Pulse: Interpreting and Using Public Opinion Research in Local Government, IDeA, Improvement and Development Agency, 2000.

Local e-Government Now: Building on Success, IDeA and socitm. Improvement and Development Agency, 2004.

Assessment of Innovative Approaches to Testing Community Opinion, Laird, A et al, Scottish Executive, Central Research Unit, 2000.

Effective Research for RSLs, Laird, R & Greaves, K, Housing Corporation, 2000.

Running STATUS: a Guide to Undertaking the Standardised Tenant Satisfaction Survey, National Housing Federation, 2003.

Measuring and Understanding Customer Satisfaction, MORI, Office of Public Service Reform, 2002.

Promoting Inclusion of Minority Ethnic Communities: A Best Practice and Training Guide for Scottish Tenant' Groups, Positive Action in Housing, 2002.

Good Practice Guidance Consultation with Equalities Groups, Scottish Executive Central Research Unit and Equality Unit, Reid-Howie Associates, 2002.

Looking into Housing: A Practical Guide to Housing Research, Robertson, D and McLaughlin, CIH, 1996.

The Practical Guide to Social Welfare Research, Robertson, D and Dearing, A, Russell House Publishing, 2004.

Guidance Booklet No. 11: Good Practice for Interpreting and Translating, SFHA, 2001.

The Active Community – Innovative consultation and participation methods for housing, Sinclair, Frauke, Association of London Government, 1999.

Continuous Improvement for Housing Associations: Discussion Paper, Walker, R. M, The Housing Corporation, 2003.

5.3 Further resources and guidance

This section includes a selection of further resources and guidance. The comments on each are based on the views of the authors of this guidance.

Accounts Commission (1999), *Can't get no satisfaction? Using a gap approach to measure service quality*
Available at: www.accounts-commission.gov.uk

This is a detailed guide to the Servqual approach which examines customer satisfaction across different aspects of services by assessing customer expectations, views of current services and any gaps between the two. This helps managers to identify and prioritise improvements to the service. It helpfully breaks down the different determinants or dimensions of service quality (such as reliability, responsiveness and competence) which are relevant to most services and assesses the importance attached to each of these by customers. The approach allows comparisons of different customer groups and different parts of a service, for example, different area offices. Be warned that using Servqual will show that most of the time services will be failing to meet expectations; it's necessary to be prepared for this and to use the information to prioritise where to put service improvement efforts. Whilst potentially useful, Servqual is quite a technical approach requiring understanding of inferential statistics and survey design and may require external support to ensure the approach is conducted well. It may be worth considering other ways of assessing expectations.

Audit Commission (1999), *Listen Up! Effective Community Consultation*
Available at: www.audit-commission.gov.uk

This paper does not discuss consultation methodologies in detail, but focuses on the importance of planning consultation, good practice principles, overcoming common obstacles to effective consultation and evaluating the effectiveness of consultation exercises. It suggests it is possible to consult on complex issues as well as smaller more tightly focused consultations on matters of service detail and address the need to develop a strategic approach to consultation across an organisation. The report provides specific advice to local authority members about using consultation in making policy and improving services. There is also advice on involving members of the community directly in carrying out consultation and how to manage vocal minorities. Good practice principles are set out to ensure that consultations are useful in practice and related to a decision that the agency intends to take, rather than being undertaken for their own sake. It highlights key competencies in consultation and the need to make consultations inclusive, but does not go into technical details. It also sets out key questions to ask when evaluating consultation exercises. The examples are drawn from across public agencies and are likely to be very useful for social sector landlords.

Audit Commission and Housing Corporation (2004), *Management Handbook*

***Housing – Improving services through resident involvement*, Audit Commission**
Available at: www.audit-commission.gov.uk

This handbook argues that housing organisations should have a clearer idea about why they are involving residents, should offer different levels of and routes to involvement and participation and should have a better idea of the costs and benefits of resident involvement. It provides some tools and case studies which may be helpful thinking through the design of approaches to resident involvement. These need to be suited to the local context and offer different routes to involvement for both individual tenants and tenants groups. It also highlights the need to understand your tenant profile and their preferences for communication and to reach all sections of the community by using creative and tailored approaches that encourage involvement.

Chartered Institute of Housing (2000), *Quality and Customer Focus: Good Practice Briefing No. 19 CIH*

This good practice briefing focuses on the delivery of quality housing services. It discusses what is meant by 'quality', 'customer care' and 'customer focus'. The guide acknowledges that quality in social housing is about service outcomes, not outputs and that outcomes desired by customers are less easy to measure than outputs. It does look at some ways in which landlords can test the quality of services, but is not a detailed guide to methods.

Chartered Institute of Housing (2003), *Housing Management Standards Manual Version 2.7 CIH*

This manual, designed for use on intranets, provides a comprehensive framework of standards for housing management services covering all types of landlord in England, Wales and Scotland. The chapters on Customer Care and Service User Involvement both contain good practice examples of interest, although those specifically on testing customer satisfaction tend to focus on the use of surveys by social landlords. Whilst these examples contain ideas and hints, this is of limited value as a practical guide to methods.

The Housing Corporation (2002), *Customer Involvement: Opportunities for Learning from the Private Sector? Office for Public Management*

This report suggests that the housing sector is less likely to involve customers in market research and product design than the private sector. It suggests that in an increasingly competitive world, a shift in approach could help social landlords. The examples included suggest that the private sector uses similar quantitative and qualitative methods to seek customer views, but how they view their market may be different, for example, in distinguishing between current and potential customers and more explicitly seeking to understand the changing lifestyles of customers, improve product design and services and predict future trends.

www.bankofgoodpractice.org

Although the material here is related to the regulatory code and guidance that applies in England, this web site is worth a browse for good practice material of wider relevance on Continuous Improvement including Best Value and benchmarking and Involving Residents.

Improvement and Development Agency (2000), *Feeling the Pulse: Interpreting and Using Public Opinion Research in Local Government*, IDeA

This is a guide to using the results of survey based research in local government. It provides checklists of questions to ask when reviewing the findings of surveys and there is some guidance for analysis of survey data. It also looks at using research results to set priorities and translating the results into action. Although there is much helpful advice in reviewing research, the real value comes in being able to build this advice into the design and commissioning of surveys, so that decisions about what gets included in a survey, are based on a sound and clear assessment of how the results are intended to be used.

Improvement and Development Agency (2004), *Local e-Government Now: Building on Success*, IDeA and socitm

This is the latest review in the Local e-government now series which reviews the progress and practice of local e-government implementation. The report contains articles written by practitioners working in different types of organisations with different perspectives on the progress and challenges facing local e-government development. It also contains case study examples from across the UK of local e-government implementation that demonstrate how councils and their partners are building on previous work to improve local services. The case studies were selected to provide good examples of e-government implementation in terms of three themes: transformation through corporate policy change, working with partners and implementation of e-government by smaller councils. This report also identifies four challenges for those involved in the implementation of e-government: building on customer care to develop a new customer experience; building on consultation to encourage greater participation by citizens; building on information to enhance service delivery and building on outcomes to increase public value.

Laird, A, et al (2000), *Assessment of Innovative Approaches to Testing Community Opinion*, Scottish Executive Central Research Unit

This considers the use of innovative approaches to community consultation across a range of public sector organisations in different policy contexts. It highlights the need for improved strategic planning and management of community consultation, for more formal and systematic evaluations of the effectiveness of consultation and for more outcome evaluations to be undertaken. Approaches to evaluation are suggested and guidance is provided (including practical examples) that aims to encourage and stimulate thinking around the use of different consultation techniques.

Laird, R, & Greaves, K (2000), *Effective Research for RSLs*, Housing Corporation

This research manual provides guidance to help registered social landlords (RSLs) to improve the organisation and the quality of their research into tenants' views and expectations about service quality. The authors point out that the guidance applies to research about customers of general housing needs only. The manual contains checklists of research competencies for both managers and staff and describes the most commonly used types of social research and when to use them. Introductory guidance on how to use different methods is given and there is also advice on reporting results, basic principles of ethical standards in research and a glossary of research terms. The guidance emphasises that to make maximum use of research it must be built into and integrated with the RSLs' organisational strategies and advice is provided on how to do this. Also highlighted is the importance of a co-ordinated approach to research organisation, planning, implementation and feedback activities and advice on achieving these is provided. The guidance is based on widely accepted good practice and examples of uses of research by RSLs feature throughout.

National Housing Federation (2003), *Running STATUS: a Guide to Undertaking the Standardised Tenant Satisfaction Survey*, National Housing Federation

STATUS is a standardised, postal tenant satisfaction survey approved by the Housing Corporation and ODPM in England and Wales. The guide covers all aspects of the process, including considering how tenant opinion relates to the Best Value process and the relationship between STATUS and other types of tenant feedback. Although STATUS is not used in Scotland, some of the material in the appendices may be of interest to Scottish social landlords. This includes both housing association and local authority versions of the STATUS questionnaire, example letters to tenants, a bibliography and glossary, a model report, draft brief for contractors, and an explanation of how statistical reliability is assessed. There is also guidance on how best to recruit external contractors.

Office of Public Service Reform (2002), *Measuring and Understanding Customer Satisfaction*, MORI
Available at: www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk

This report provides much of interest to the debate about measuring satisfaction with public services. It discusses the role of expectations and looks at different ways to identify priorities for improvement, including SERVQUAL. There is a good discussion of the meaning of satisfaction and the technical aspects of measuring and interpreting attitudes through the use of different types of rating scales. This should be recommended reading for anyone tempted to lump the 'very' and 'fairly' satisfied customers together to paint a better picture of performance.

Positive Action in Housing (2002), *Promoting Inclusion of Minority Ethnic Communities: A Best Practice and Training Guide for Scottish Tenant' Groups*, PAIH
Available at: www.paih.org

This aims to provide guidance about how tenants' organisations can promote inclusion and involvement of all minority ethnic groups. The guide briefly sets out the legislation relating to unfair discrimination and the legal responsibilities of tenants' groups. Strategies are suggested for reaching minority ethnic groups and for communicating with and involving groups and individuals. The importance of equality and diversity awareness training is highlighted and suggestions for the content of training are made. Examples of good practice are included that demonstrate some practical steps for promoting inclusion. The appendices contain resources such as a model equal opportunities policy, suggested contents of an equal opportunities pack, exercises relating to diversity awareness and contact details for further sources of information and help.

Reid-Howie Associates (2002), *Good Practice Guidance Consultation with Equalities Groups*, Scottish Executive Central Research Unit and Equality Unit

This provides guidance to ensure that equalities groups are not excluded from public consultation exercises. It highlights the importance of considering equality issues from the start of the consultation and considers the many barriers to participation that can occur at all stages of the consultation and how to address them. The main methods of consultation, how to choose between them and how to combine them are explored and guidance is provided on how to reach 'hard to reach groups' and how to publicise consultation events. Practical issues related to carrying out an inclusive consultation are examined such as staff attitudes and skills, timing, accessibility, providing information and feedback and guidance is provided on organising inclusive events. Practical examples from statutory and community-based organisations are provided throughout.

Robertson, D and McLaughlin (1996), *Looking into Housing: A Practical Guide to Housing Research*, CIH

This is designed for housing practitioners who wish to carry out research. It includes chapters on project planning and design, commissioning research and a number of methods including observation and case studies. A second edition is forthcoming. Note that the content is similar to Robertson, D and Dearing, A (2004) discussed below.

Robertson, D and Dearing, A (2004), *The Practical Guide to Social Welfare Research*, Russell House Publishing

This book has its origins in a previous publication by the Chartered Institute of Housing 'Looking into Housing: A Practical Guide to Housing Research' 1996. It includes information on a number of research techniques that is common to both books but this edition addresses the conduct and commissioning of a wider range of social research, including service user consultation. As a result, this edition is more relevant to the broader Community Planning and regeneration policy areas. It does discuss the challenges of user involvement in research but does not include information on participatory methods. The appendices include a sample research brief and research contract.

Scottish Executive (2004) *Consultation Good Practice Guide*
Available at: www.scotland.gov.uk
This provides a series of checklists to ensure all options are considered when

deciding how to run a consultation exercise. It refers to Scottish Executive guidelines, but is also likely to be useful for RSLs and local authorities undertaking consultation, whether through issuing written consultation papers or undertaking non-written consultation exercises. It refers to the need to target groups less likely to respond to a written consultation paper and gives advice on accessing specific groups. There is also guidance on organising inclusive consultation events and outlines of some research methods that could be used. It also includes a section on evaluating the consultation process itself and an annex includes guidance for the analysis of written consultations.

Scottish Federation of Housing Associations (2001), *Guidance Booklet No. 11: Good Practice for Interpreting and Translating*, SFHA

This booklet on interpreting and translating aims to provide registered social landlords with information and good practice guidance on how to work with interpreters; what to expect from interpreters and translators in terms of quality; how to prepare text for translation, and contact details for public service interpreting and translating services, including costs.

Scottish Parliament (2004), *Participation Handbook*, Participation Services
Available at: www.scottish.parliament.uk

This provides lots of practical suggestions on how to seek individual and collective views. The focus is on increasing interaction and creating better dialogue through individual, small and large group methods. Lateral thinking is encouraged and there are a number of creative ideas for methods that can promote more active engagement and those that may work better with more marginalised or excluded groups.

Sinclair, Frauke (1999), *The Active Community – Innovative consultation and participation methods for housing*, available from the Association of London Government

This looks at ten research and consultation techniques that can help to build successful consultation and participation, drawing on case studies from housing and other public services. Most of the techniques examined are designed for use with groups, rather than individuals, although it does include the use of satisfaction surveys. The report makes the link between the objectives of consultation exercises and the techniques that may be suited to meet those objectives.

Stevenson, R, & Gibson, P (2002), *Customer and Citizen Focused Public Service*, Scottish Executive Central Research Unit

This evaluates how Scottish public services organisations use customer feedback about services to support continuous improvement within public services. It also examines the range and impact of processes used in citizen consultation on decision making in public sector organisations about issues such as the planning, development and delivery of services. The research identifies research methods currently used by public service organisations to obtain customer feedback and to consult with the public. It provides advice about the appropriate application of different research methods in different circumstances and advice is offered about how to reach 'hard-to-reach' groups. The research also examines the necessary support structures and capacity requirements of public sector organisations to ensure their focus on customer and public service needs. Examples of good practice drawn from a range of public service providers in a variety of locations across Scotland are provided throughout the report.

Walker, R M (2003), *Continuous Improvement for Housing Associations: Discussion Paper*, The Housing Corporation
Available at: www.bankofgoodpractice.org

This paper discusses the implications and impact of continuous improvement in the housing association sector. Continuous improvement is defined as on-going process innovations that are focused on the strategic goals of the organisation. It is seen as a process of fine-tuning and on going adaptation to improve organisational performance. This goes beyond traditional formal performance measurement systems that focus on ad hoc assessments of outputs to assessments of outcomes such as effectiveness, fairness and impact on quality of life, which are less easy to measure in traditional quantitative ways. It develops a model of continuous improvement that shows a need to develop a strategic approach if continuous improvement is to become a 'way of life' which supports organisational learning. This is a useful conceptual and discursive review of themes and challenges, rather than a practical, hands-on guide.

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