Insight in the housing sector
Research headlines
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Our model of co-operative regulation is all about landlords and tenants working together to design and deliver services to meet local needs. Only by understanding who their tenants are and what services are important to them – and by communicating in ways that tenants want – can providers start to meet these expectations.

One tool which can help them to achieve this is tenant profiling and insight.

Our feedback from providers and tenants shows insight and profiling has attracted a great deal of interest, but also a degree of confusion. Providers tell us they are keen to use tenant profiling. They see it as a key tool to support engagement with tenants and improvement to services. What is less clear to some is how to collect and organise information and how to put it to best use.

This research summary and its accompanying toolkit help to explode some of the myths of profiling. It aims to raise awareness beyond a discussion of process and explains what can be achieved.

Peter Marsh
Chief Executive
Tenant insight is a valuable tool that registered providers can use to inform and improve service delivery. Gathering information is a vital step but it is only the beginning stage of any process to drive improvement – how data is translated into meaningful information that can be used to influence the service provided is the most important aspect. To know and understand what tenants think and feel and how they are likely to act, factual information (such as age, disability, and family status) needs to be combined with information about attitudes, needs and aspirations.

CIH and HouseMark undertook sector research to inform an understanding of:

- how tenant insight is currently being used across the housing sector
- the perceived benefits, barriers and challenges
- how tenant insight can deliver tangible outcomes across the sector

The full methodology of the research is set out in Appendix 1.

This report highlights the findings from the research and supports registered providers in understanding and making the case for developing and delivering effective tenant insight. It is aimed specifically at senior managers, board and committee members and others who are responsible for driving business and service development at a strategic level across the sector. It is supported by a toolkit which is aimed at officers responsible for developing, managing and assessing tenant insight. The information developed in the toolkit was informed by some of the key findings from the research. The toolkit provides practical guidance and includes definitions, useful case studies, checklists and self-assessment questions.

A note on terminology: often, the terms ‘profiling’ and ‘insight’ are used interchangeably, but in fact they are distinct. Both are activities rather than ends in themselves.

- **Profiling** is the activity of collecting, analysing and segmenting information about your tenants (current and future) to provide a detailed picture of their characteristics, including demographics, needs and behaviours, attitudes, lifestyles and aspirations. Done in isolation, profiling will not usually provide you with insight
- **Insight** is the subsequent use of this information to develop a comprehensive knowledge and understanding of relevant aspects of your tenants’ behaviours, beliefs, needs, desires and aspirations, so that how you communicate with them and the services you design and deliver are aligned to their needs and expectations. Insight on its own is not the end result – it is a trigger for action. It will help you understand the why, how, who and what, in order to help you achieve your outcomes

For the purposes of this report, the term ‘tenant insight’ refers to the whole process – from setting objectives to achieving the end results. The term ‘insight’ refers to the specific activity which forms part of the process as described above.
Where are we now?

The literature review, survey and interviews confirm many of our initial assumptions about the use of tenant insight in the sector.

Results from the baseline survey (see appendix 1) show that there is an appetite in the sector to use profiling and insight but that many providers still lack the information and systems required to do so. It shows that many providers are still in the early stages of developing a strategy to support their profiling work, suggesting that co-ordination of approaches may be weak. It also shows that there are some areas, such as communications and the provision of support services, where insight is more commonly used than in others, such as business development.

Detailed discussions with organisations that have developed their use of insight in recent years provide helpful lessons about how best to approach data collection. They also illustrate ways in which insight can bring benefits to providers and their tenants.

The literature review confirms that there is little guidance or research into good practice on customer profiling for housing providers to draw on. The most detailed guidance available is aimed at third sector organisations (Cabinet Office) or local authorities to support their strategic role (IDeA).

There appears to be a significant gap in available guidance to support registered providers to translate information into insight and subsequently use this to deliver tangible results. This is borne out in the research, as the case studies sourced were often narrowly focused and tended to demonstrate an activity rather than outcomes. An additional gap is found in analysis and commentary on the financial costs and the efficiency or service benefits of profiling and insight.

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How tenant insight fits within a wider context

Improving public services

A key policy objective of the previous government was the improvement of public services through the ‘modernisation agenda’. Policy initiatives have focused on the development of a more holistic view of public service delivery with the needs of the service user at the forefront.

In 2006, Sir David Varney’s Review of Service Transformation examined the opportunities for a complete overhaul of public service delivery. The review highlighted a number of key areas:

• increased expectations for evidence-based policy and frontline service delivery
• customer insight as a strategic asset is essential to a customer-driven approach to service delivery
• information collected should be targeted in areas where the provision of better customer insight would aid policy development, service delivery and communications
• a need to identify the training requirements to achieve competence in customer insight and develop a toolbox of techniques and methodologies.

The review led to the publication of the Transformational Government Strategy by the National Cabinet Office and the establishment of an Insight Forum to support the work of the National Cabinet Office Delivery Council with the mandate to drive people-focused services across government and the public sector. The forum’s work has included:

• sharing learning on the use of customer insight among councils and their partners
• acting as a link to central government, in particular the cross-government Public Service Customer Insight Forum, supported by the Cabinet Office

The Big Society and links with localism agenda

The new coalition government continues this theme of local empowerment. The new administration emphasises localism: the empowerment of local communities to exercise greater influence over their communities and the delivery of local public services. The Decentralisation and Localism Bill intends to devolve greater powers to councils and neighbourhoods and give local communities control over housing and planning decisions. Provisions include:

• returning decision-making powers on housing and planning to local councils
• introducing new powers to help save local facilities and services threatened with closure, and giving communities the right to bid to take over local state-run services
• giving residents the power to instigate local referendums on any local issue and the power to veto excessive council tax increases
• providing greater financial autonomy to local government and community groups
• creating new trusts that would make it simpler for communities to provide homes for local people
The Bill will entail greater accountability on the part of local government to communities, which will, in turn, require local authorities to develop a much more sophisticated understanding of the needs and aspirations of local communities.

In addition, the theme of the Big Society is a key component of the approach of the new administration which emphasises a greater role for local groups and community action. Moving to embrace the localism agenda will entail local government developing greater accountability to, engagement with, and empowerment of communities. To do this well will require local authorities to develop a much more sophisticated understanding of the characteristics, needs and aspirations of local communities.

The regulatory framework

The regulator for social housing, the Tenant Services Authority (TSA), aims to “champion tenants’ needs and aspirations for housing” and to “adopt a co-regulatory and proportionate approach” to regulation in which tenants play a leading role. The TSA’s standards framework says, “Understanding the needs of all tenants is essential for providers and forms a cross-cutting requirement that applies to all our standards. This includes meeting the needs of people drawn from the seven equality strands: race, disability, sexual orientation, age, gender, religion or belief and gender identity and those with care or support needs.”

The TSA emphasises the importance of customer choice in informing the design and delivery of services offered by housing organisations. A key element in the regulatory framework is the local offer, which provides a new approach to aligning the wants and aspirations of tenants with the services they receive from their landlord.

The standards framework sets an expectation that local offers will be made to tenants, recognising that there should be opportunities to tailor services to reflect local priorities. The definition of what is ‘local’ is for providers and their tenants, and can be in relation to demographic factors as well as geographical ones. Of course, this requires providers to have knowledge of these factors to inform and justify their approaches. All registered providers are required to consult with tenants in the design of local offers.

Registered providers must state in their annual report by 1 October 2010 how the local offer will be implemented.

Drive for efficiency

The economic downturn and subsequent tightening in public expenditure has placed new pressures on housing providers to deliver services efficiently and to provide greater value for money. In tighter fiscal times, customer insight offers housing providers opportunities to:

• distinguish which services are valuable to customers and to review or remove those services that are not required
• target resources more effectively at areas identified by customers as being important to them
• identify new areas of service provision and business development
• develop future-proofing strategies through the collation of market intelligence which will guide housing providers to deliver the housing services of the future

Fiscal constraint is focusing attention on more effective joined-up working in the context of Total Place. Total Place has evolved from the Treasury’s Operational Efficiency Programme (OEP) which aims at achieving greater efficiency in a number of cross-cutting areas. Total Place looks at how a ‘whole area’ approach to public services can lead to better services at less cost. The Total Place programme maps flows of public spending in local areas and make links between services, to identify where public money can be spent more effectively. Using tenant insight to better understand need is a critical part of this approach.

The operating context creates strong external drivers towards using insight. The rest of this report focuses on how the housing sector is currently building up profile information and using insight.
Research findings

The TSA commissioned CIH and HouseMark to undertake research to help to establish a baseline position for the sector and which identified:

- how tenant insight is currently being used across the housing sector
- the perceived benefits, barriers and challenges
- how tenant insight can deliver tangible outcomes across the sector
- current good practice in tenant insight
- recommendations for future development

The detailed methodology is contained in appendix 1 but, in summary, the following activities were undertaken to help support a broad and reflective baseline from which to draw the findings and recommendations:

- desktop research of material across a range of service and public sectors, to draw on existing experience and learning
- an online survey, to build a robust baseline of practice in the sector
- detailed on-site research with a sample of ten organisations to learn from recent experience and developing approaches in the sector
- interviews with both housing and non-housing organisations known to have benefited from broader insight work
- a roundtable of practitioners, to undertake a comparative discussion of practices and experiences with an exploration of issues, concerns and barriers

Headlines from the research

The headline findings are extracted from the research detailed above. The quantitative information is largely drawn from results of the online survey and supported by more qualitative information from the onsite research and practitioner interviews.

A strategic approach

- 37% of providers do not have a tenant insight strategy in place. This suggests either that many are in the very early stages of using profiling, or that there is a risk of unfocused or uncoordinated approaches to profiling. This high figure needs to be seen against the 57% of providers which either have one or are in the process of developing one. The high proportion of organisations (32%) that are currently developing a strategy suggests that profiling is still in its infancy in many organisations but that it is becoming embedded
- Investment in insight is not necessarily underpinned by a strategy. Only 50% who say they ‘invest heavily’ in customer insight have a strategy, and around 30% who invest heavily do not have one
- Providers generally felt that a strategic approach to insight is more important than a written strategy. This included a clarity on objectives at the outset – what insight can be used for and

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2 Case study and roundtable research showed that some organisations integrate tenant insight into customer service strategies, and therefore the findings on the presence of bespoke strategies should be presented with a caveat.
how will it contribute to corporate or team-level objectives

- A number of organisations that wanted to increase significantly the amount of data held on their tenants found a focused strategy specifically to collect data useful. This included clear priorities for which information, targets for collection allocated to team level, a range of techniques and contact points, and systems to ensure accuracy and consistent recording of data collected

**Customer information**

- Basic profile information, such as name and address, is the most commonly held information. However only three-quarters have a full dataset (for 100% of their tenants) in place for this information
- More comprehensive data sets are held on support needs and communication preferences, but still only around 35% of organisations have data for 75% or more of their tenants. Around 25% of organisations report having data on these issues for less than 25% of their tenants
- Data on the ways utilities are paid, literacy levels and employment status are not widely held

**Equality and diversity information**

- None of the organisations surveyed held a full dataset on all of the seven strands of equality and diversity (age, disability, gender, gender identity, race, religion or belief, sexual orientation)
- Full or partial datasets (data for more than 75% of tenants) are most commonly held on gender (83% of respondents), age (81%) and race (64%). Full or partial data sets on gender identity and sexual orientation are least commonly held (24% and 14%, respectively)
- Most providers surveyed raised concerns about asking for sensitive or personal information specifically on disability, religion or belief, or sexual orientation. This appeared primarily to be an issue about both staff and tenants not understanding why the information is being requested and what will be done with it. Several providers (those who use face-to-face collection) reported that there is no evidence of higher refusal rates on these questions than others. The toolkit offers advice and guidance on collecting personal and sensitive information

**Tenancy information**

- The highest proportion of full datasets (ie data for 100% of tenants) is held on arrears levels (90% of respondents), followed by start date of tenancy (87%) and repairs history (83%)
- Data on anti-social behaviour is less commonly held than on other housing management matters. Only 51% hold a full dataset on anti-social behaviour incidents reported (eight per cent do not hold any such data at all)

**Information collection methods**

- The most common information collection methods are: interview at start of tenancy (97% of respondents), housing applications (86%),
in-house staff (84%), postal surveys (77%), as well as STATUS survey and CORE logs (74%)

- Opportunities to check accuracy, update information held and fill gaps (such as annual tenancy visits, contractors’ visits and through the contact centre) are less widely used

- The majority of organisations (87% of respondents) collect quantitative information on their tenants (other than STATUS) and around three-quarters analyse data they hold on their customers

- Methods such as customer journey mapping and web-hit and external data analysis are less common but are used by 30-40% of providers

- Information is usually collected by in-house staff, predominantly by a customer service or research team. Smaller organisations seem to be less likely to have dedicated research/insight teams

Information storage

- In the majority of cases (61% of respondents), data held on tenants is held in a single database.

- Access to data is generally not restricted by seniority, and frontline staff are equally able to access information as middle and senior management

- Many providers said that their current housing management systems are still not adequate to meet their insight requirement (both storage, analysis and retrieval) and therefore use their own ‘manual’ methods, eg exporting and manipulating data in spreadsheets

- Customer Relationship Management software is seen as a real advantage because it can often show personal profile and preferences in a way that housing management software cannot. This does mean that different interactions with tenants are held in different systems, however. Some use business intelligence software to help collate information across the organisation and link into corporate strategic priorities

Access to information

- Just fewer than 70% of respondents say that managers themselves can produce reports based on the information held without having to go through the IT department first

- In 70% of cases requests for information are dealt within one to three days

- Access to information is an important concern for providers and there does not yet seem to be clarity over good practice, ie how to make sure that best use can be made of information held on individuals whilst protecting privacy

- Some organisations restrict access to some information to specific levels or individuals within the organisation, eg by using different databases to hold different information or by using restricted access within databases

- There was a perceived lack of clarity among the majority of providers about what information can be shared and this was often cited as a barrier to doing so. The toolkit contains clear guidance on this issue and other data protection issues

Profiling information

- Most of the organisations that took part in the research undertook some profiling activities (at differing levels of complexity)
• A number of providers are working with external commercial data providers, such as Experian or CACI. See the toolkit for more information on profiling and external providers. The most common approach (endorsed by commercial providers) is to develop eight segmentation groups, although it is not clear whether this is the most effective approach for providers.
• Some providers reported that segmentation was too complicated, and that the results sometimes did not help inform a new approach. An alternative approach used was to focus on understanding service provision and use it at patch level.

Financial costs and benefits

• Twenty per cent of respondents indicated that they had invested more than £30,000 over two years. The majority (75%) of providers who reported investing this amount were medium to large organisations (ie with a stock size of 5,001-25,000). However, ten per cent of smaller organisations (ie with a stock size of 1,001-5,000) also invested this amount.
• Nearly 90% of those who invested £6,000-£10,000 over two years represented small to medium providers (ie with a stock size of 1,001-10,000).
• Only one in ten providers actually measured the level of financial return on investment from tenant insight work. Reasons given were that they are not expecting to get one, they are not able to do so, or they are too early in their use of insight to know. A handful of providers reported some moderate savings, for example around rent collection.
• Providers were aware of the importance of being able to demonstrate value for money and a return on this work, especially in times of financial austerity, pressure on budgets and close scrutiny of spending choices made. As a result, they were revisiting how they could demonstrate this.

Identified outcomes from tenant insight

• Many organisations were able to show how they had used insight but not necessarily whether it had led to improvements. There were some occasions where providers were unclear on how to use insight gained.
• Recognising the most appropriate and receptive ways to communicate with customers was perceived as the most common outcome achieved (76%). This is followed by understanding the needs of more vulnerable customers (67%), providing support to help maintain tenancies (60%) and informing strategic planning and policy development (59%).
• Tracking changes in demand and identifying processes or services that are no longer required are less common outcomes (19% and 29% respectively). Only a third of respondents reported improved cost efficiency.
• On occasions, some providers found that using insight information led to slightly perverse outcomes. For example, a better understanding of the tenant profile led one provider to redeploy arrears staff to work on helping to get people
into work. As tenants did move into work, arrears went up, but there were fewer arrears staff to deal with the cases and so targets were missed

**Identified drivers**

- The most commonly stated drivers for tenant insight were:
  - to provide the best possible service to the most excluded households – this related to both service quality and also personalisation
  - to make a positive contribution to place, and to support housing and non-housing improvements in a neighbourhood
- Efficiency in services was not cited as a major driver, although it was relevant. The effectiveness of, and satisfaction with, services was much more dominant
- Unlike in the private or commercial sector, very few registered providers mentioned a desire to improve or secure market share in service provision. However, the need to respond to the pressures of competition was cited by supported housing providers due to the competitive nature of funding and commissioning arrangements
- Some providers had also seen that insight could help them create opportunities to develop income generating services, although that was not the primary driver for them
Challenges and opportunities

The findings from the research demonstrate that most registered providers now undertake some level of tenant insight work and understand the values it can bring. Most are striving to collect useful and meaningful information, although all were at differing stages. The research demonstrates that developing effective insight can lead to a range of positive outcomes for both providers and tenants. It makes good business sense as it enables providers to understand:

- the needs and expectations of both individuals and groups of tenants
- the real diversity of the tenant base
- which groups of tenants require the most cost-intensive services
- current and future housing and support needs
- the most effective and preferred methods of communication for different tenant groups
- who previously hidden or hard-to-reach tenants are
- where time and resources are being concentrated
- ‘place’ and neighbourhood mix

This understanding can support providers to deliver, for example:

- tailored services which offer greater value for money
- efficiency savings through removal of services no longer required
- expectations and requirements of equality legislation
- regulatory expectations and requirements
- services that meet the needs of future tenants
- tailored and local offers
- better involvement and empowerment opportunities

The positive benefits of tenant insight are explored in more detail in the toolkit.

Challenges

Despite the range of positive benefits and improved outcomes it can deliver, the research showed that there is still a number of challenges that registered providers face in developing and implementing effective tenant insight. Common challenges cited included:

- staff resistance
- difficulties creating an ‘insight culture’
- tenant resistance (either do not support it or feel ‘over-surveyed’)
- poor knowledge of what to do with the information collected
- insufficient or inadequate resources
- poor co-ordination of data gathering
- lack of understanding of why information is being collected
- lack of understanding of how to turn information collected into something useful
- data protection
- assessing impact and value for money

The toolkit which accompanies this report shows how to identify the best approach to insight and how to overcome these challenges in a way that suits individual providers.
Lessons from the research

In order to develop and implement effective tenant insight with individual organisations, registered providers should:

• think broadly and creatively about how an approach to tenant insight could be applied across the whole organisation
• identify business needs and develop a strategic approach to insight which covers culture as well as processes
• recognise and accept that tenants are not obliged to provide personal information and work with them to build confidence to provide it
• ensure any tenant insight strategy recognises that there are two sources of internal data – daily transactions with tenants and direct collection
• understand the possible uses of different types of data – customer information, equality and diversity data and tenancy information
• use insight to inform medium to long-term service and business development, as well as immediate changes to services
• explore partnerships with local authorities and others with external data
• consider tenants’ overall views, not just their satisfaction with the current service offer
• be an intelligent commissioner when purchasing external data
• invest in skills to make the best use of data
• ensure new IT systems purchased support insight work, and consider refinements to existing systems where necessary
• develop a clear policy on data sharing and build staff confidence
• be clear on the amount and type of data use that can be supported within the organisation

• understand equality and diversity issues and those relating to vulnerability
• build understanding of tenants’ responses to changes made due to insight
• try to understand the cost and return of insight work
• understand how insight can support both regulatory and legislative expectations

In order to drive sector-led improvement and develop a good practice approach to tenant insight, providers and stakeholders could collectively:

• explore the development of peer support mechanisms around profiling and insight within the sector, eg benchmarking for customer profiling and networks for those leading on insight work
• encourage information sharing between local providers and agencies (eg sharing the cost of mosaic licences), routinely providing data that is not subscription (eg Local Strategic Partnership outcome monitoring)
• identify segments which would be of most use to the sector
• investigate how housing management software could be better designed to support insight (not just profiling)
• share experiences of collecting sensitive and/or personal information
• articulate how providers have used tenant insight to find efficiencies in their business
• support improvements in skills to assess value for money
Appendix 1 – methodology

Customer profiling is a nascent activity within the social housing sector, which means that little has been written about it and few practitioners have extensive experience of it. The project sought information from a range of sources to ensure the key points in TSA’s specification could be addressed.

Literature review

Written materials which look at customer insight were identified and summarised. These included guidance documents aimed at supporting local government and the third sector to use insight; expectations on the social housing sector set out by the Audit Commission and TSA; and examples of usage drawn from the sector.

Online survey

An online survey was developed to try to generate a quantitative baseline of use of insight in the sector, and to give providers an opportunity to comment on how they use insight. The survey looked at strategic approaches, data collection, common barriers, common applications, and costs. It was anonymous to encourage honest completion, but it collected information on organisation type and size to help understand any trends linked to these factors.

Invitations to complete the survey were sent directly to 570 providers, and open invitations were made in CIH and HouseMark e-newsletters. The survey was open for three weeks and captured the experiences of 92 providers. Restrictions on completion meant that it was not possible to get multiple responses from one provider.

Out of sector interviews

Profiling and insight are quite new to the social housing sector but are more established in other fields. Private and third sector organisations beyond social housing were approached to share their experiences and applications of profiling and insight, so that comparisons can be made and applicable lessons learned.

Organisations studied were:

- Barratt – using profiling and segmentation to support marketing and sales in a difficult economic climate
- Ford Retail – embedding data collection and use culture to improve targeted customer service and, therefore, increase sales
- Moveme.com – use of technology in customer-facing systems
- NHS/British Lung Foundation – using insight to support a ‘social marketing’ programme to reduce smoking
- Police – using insight to support a knife-crime reduction programme

In sector interviews

Nine housing providers were involved in detailed telephone interviews. Organisations were selected to give a cross-section of the types of providers in the sector (traditional housing association, large-scale voluntary transfer, arm’s-length management
organisation, retained stock, large, small and specialist), and a range of approaches to profiling/insight. Providers chosen were approached either because they have been using profiling/insight for some time and so were expected to have useful experiences to share, or because they were known to use effective practices in different aspects of profiling/insight.

Organisations interviewed were:

• Blackpool Coastal
• Beechdale Community
• Bromford
• Bromsgrove District Housing Trust
• Harvest
• Herefordshire Housing
• London Borough of Barking and Dagenham
• Look Ahead
• Midland Heart

**Roundtable**

To add to findings from the in-sector interviews, and to allow comparative discussions on our emerging findings, we held a roundtable discussion. Discussion centred on the more difficult issues identified through earlier research – assessing value for money, collecting and using data on sexuality, useful data and segments etc.

The participants were from providers known to have an established approach to insight (some from the advisory group, others asked to be involved in their survey response), and also from organisations with an interest in the direction of profiling in the sector. Organisations involved were:

Audit Commission, Bernadette Fry
BDHT, Graeme Anderson
BDHT, Dianne Trow
Chevin Housing Association, Jas Bangerh
Chevin Housing Association, Caroline Grosvenor
Communities and Local Government, Richard Crossley
Cornwall Council, Emma Blatchford
Gloucestershire Housing Association, Kathryn Warner
Helena Housing, Colin Ward
Homes for Haringey, Arshi Zaman
Homes for Haringey, Sue Hunter
LHT, Lynn Bundu
Lincoln City Council, John Bibby
Midland Heart, Stephen Russell
Newham Homes, Dawn Mather
NHF, Terry Jones
Orwell Housing, Claire Risdale
Paradigm Housing, Wendy Smith
Parkway Green, Rana Holland
Riverside, Amy Redman
TAROE, John Townend
TSA, Graeme Foster
TVHA, John Baldwin
Wokingham Borough Council, Hannah Linder
Wokingham Borough Council, Carole Devereaux
Advisory group

The work was supported by an advisory group. This group was made up of people representing providers that are making good use of insight, organisations that support the sector, and agencies driving its use in the sector. The purpose of the group was to help the project team ensure that relevant issues were researched, and that the final outputs are pitched and presented in a way that is most useful to the sector. It met once to guide on research content, and twice more (virtually) to discuss the interim report and the final outputs.

Advisory group members were:

- Audit Commission, Bernadette Fry
- Bromsgrove District Housing Association, Graeme Anderson
- Chevin Housing Association, Caroline Grosvenor
- Helena Housing, Colin Ward
- Homes for Haringey, Arshi Zaman
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