

tenants and residents associations in england— activities and operation

The LSE GV314 Group report key results from a survey of more than 500 English tenants and residents associations that examined their activities, how they work, and the problems that they face

Self-organising and independent groups of tenants and residents of a small neighbourhood or even block should interest us. One does not have to invoke cliché about politics being local to recognise that tenants and residents associations (TARAs) deal with issues of central, immediate and direct concern to citizens—the fabric and amenities of where they live, the state of their housing, the noise, traffic, and crime. Their roles can include representing local communities to government as well as private bodies, mobilising local residents as well as gaining the support of non-residents in issues of local concern, providing direct services to tenants and residents, enhancing community social and cultural life, and forming the basis for wider social enterprises. We do not know much about them. We do not even know how many there are. The Third Sector Research Centre simply points out that there are ‘thousands’ of them.¹

Academic studies of TARAs have tended to focus on broader theoretical questions such as their transition over time from protest group to social network;² their role in creating cross-class coalitions allied to working-class agitation,³ and more recently in furthering middle-class interests, as ‘homeowner activist’ associations;⁴ and the impact of TARAs on ‘social capital’, linking their development to the

community and benefits to individuals from the development of close interpersonal networks and associations.⁵ Without seeking to deny the importance of these broader questions about the role of TARAs, we lack much detail about what they actually do, how they go about it, and with what impact.

The aim of this article is to report on a survey of 527 members of English tenants and residents associations, mainly in a leadership role, that casts significant light on their activities, how they work, and the problems that they face.

Finding TARAs

One reason that we do not have much systematic knowledge about TARAs is that it is hard to define what they are with great precision. TARAs exist within an ecology of local organisations and informal groupings where the distinctions between types are not always clear. The ecosystem includes a host of ‘below the radar’ organisations as identified by the ‘micro-mapping’ exercise of the Third Sector Research Centre,¹ such as youth groups, groups for particular ethnic groups, cultural and faith groups, groupings such as bridge clubs and radio hams, community and amenity charities identified by the National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO),⁶ the parish and community councils, and a range of

Table 1
Over-representation of TARAs in southern England

| | Respondents | As a percentage of all respondents | Percentage of English population in region | Index of disproportionality |
|--------------------|-------------|------------------------------------|--|-----------------------------|
| London | 219 | 44 | 16 | 2.8 |
| South East | 110 | 22 | 16 | 1.4 |
| South West | 60 | 12 | 10 | 1.2 |
| East | 30 | 6 | 11 | 0.5 |
| North East | 10 | 2 | 5 | 0.4 |
| East Midlands | 18 | 4 | 9 | 0.4 |
| Yorkshire & Humber | 19 | 4 | 10 | 0.4 |
| West Midlands | 19 | 4 | 10 | 0.4 |
| North West | 18 | 4 | 13 | 0.3 |
| Total | 503 | 100 | 100 | 1.0 |

other sub-municipal bodies,⁷ as well as the host of local consultative forums run by businesses, public-sector organisations, not-for-profit organisations, and private landlords.

While we are unlikely to come up with a clear watertight definition of what a TARA is, we can specify the criteria we used for defining what we sought to include or exclude from our study. We considered that TARAs are organisations focused on a community of interest substantially linked to the substance of residing in the locality, rather than from other commonalities such as a pastime or sporting interest. They have a ‘neighbourhood’ focus on localities smaller than a district or unitary local authority area. The association also has to be non-statutory, unlike a parish council, for example. It should be substantially run by the tenants or residents themselves, rather than being branches of a larger association such as a tenants union, a nationally organised association of tenants of a particular social landlord, or a consultative group organised by a landlord (whether private or social) or owner.

Our definition of TARAs broadly as non-statutory organisations focused on a community of interest substantially defined by location is, of course, still rather loose. Contacting them poses further problems, since there are no central directories of these associations.⁸ To explore TARAs we needed to mail our survey directly to leading figures in TARAs and so used conventional search engines for groups going under the names of residents/tenants/neighbourhood/community and/or association/group to get the contact details of their key office-holders from their websites and Facebook pages. We also used the lists of local TARAs that some councils compile. We examined where possible the available information about the groups to ensure that they corresponded to our understanding of a TARA. We

sent out questionnaires to 1,283 individuals, mainly chairs or other officers named on the TARA website or similar and, after two reminders, received 527 responses—a response rate of 41% (although some individual questions received fewer than 527 valid responses).

We found TARAs predominantly in the southern areas of England (see Table 1), with more respondents than one would expect, proportionate to the population; elsewhere there were fewer. London had 2.8 times as many as one would expect, and the South East and the South West 1.4 and 1.2 times as many, respectively. The Midlands and the East of England had less than half, and especially under-represented was the North West, which yielded only 18 respondents compared with an expected 69 if responses were proportionate to population. One possible explanation for this imbalance is that the method we used to gain our sample has biased the sample towards southern England. Another is that southern England really does have proportionately more TARAs. These issues are more easily addressed once we know more about the nature of the different organisations in the sample.

TARAs as organisations

Among the respondents, 40% represented memberships defined by housing tenure—with 19% representing tenants and leaseholders with public-sector landlords (two-thirds of which were councils, one-third housing associations), and with 21% private-sector tenants and leaseholders. The remaining 60% had residency-based memberships where place and not tenure is not a defining feature of membership. For the sake of brevity, we will call the former ‘tenants associations’ and the latter ‘residents associations’ where we have to distinguish between them.

Most TARAs have the legal status of an ‘unincorporated association’, a legal form that does not require registration like a company or charity but also restricts financial actions as they cannot make profits or invest savings. Other legal forms of association were represented by our respondents; 7% were registered charities and 12% were limited companies. Limited company status appears particularly predominant among smaller associations as the status is often used to manage the communal areas (such as gardens) of small estates of owner-occupiers.

The size of the association varied greatly (see Table 2); a small number (7%) of respondents came from associations representing under 20 households, while the largest single size category (27%) was those respondents from associations with over 1,000 households. Tenants associations tended to be smaller than residents associations: 58% of respondents from residents associations had over 300 households compared with 29% of those from tenants associations.

More difficult to gauge was the general level of activity of the association. As one respondent put it, ‘the association is not very active—has a few meetings a year and does the occasional tree/bulb planting’. At the other end, one has the association with, as its chair wrote, ‘920 households within this community [...] we work very closely with our local borough councillors and county councillor, various departments of the council and the police’.

One indicator of the level of activity is the amount of time that office-holders spend on TARA business: 23% spent less than an hour a week, 38% between one and three hours, and 39% over three hours. The length of time per week spent is significantly related to the size of the association, as one would expect, with 67% of respondents from TARAs with over 300 households spending over 3 hours a week compared with 39% of those from smaller TARAs.

TARAs are largely run by older people. If we take the major office-holders in the associations (chair, treasurer, and similar) that constitute the large majority (83%) of our sample, they were primarily (65%) aged 65 years or over, with only 11% aged 50 or under. The over-64s accounted for just 22% of the English population of over-14s in 2021. A large proportion (57%) had been members of the association for over 10 years, with few (11%) having been members for five years or less. Leaders of TARAs are also more likely to be men (57% of office-holders and committee members) than women (42%). Residents associations were marginally less likely to be run by men than tenants associations (55% as opposed to 61%) but more likely to be run by the over-65s (71% compared with 54%).

One reason for the preponderance of older age groups might be the amount of time demanded of office-holders in TARAs, which is possibly more easily met by those who have retired from paid

Table 2
Households in respondents’ associations

| Number of households | Number of respondents | Percentage of total |
|-----------------------|-----------------------|---------------------|
| 20 or under | 37 | 7 |
| Between 21 and 100 | 123 | 23 |
| Between 101 and 300 | 103 | 20 |
| Between 301 and 1,000 | 122 | 23 |
| Over 1,000 | 142 | 27 |

employment. Nevertheless, there was no tendency for the relatively small number of under-65s to spend less time on TARA business or to hold office in smaller associations.

For many respondents, running the association is a burden not widely shared. When asked a question about the willingness of residents and tenants to engage with the association, 30% of respondents agreed that ‘the majority of tenants/residents are keen to be involved in the Association’ and 40% disagreed (30% neither agreeing nor disagreeing). Those agreeing were marginally more numerous in residents rather than tenants associations (32% against 28%), but this was statistically insignificant.

TARA meetings tend to be relatively calm affairs, according to our respondents. Only 10% agreed that ‘strong disagreements are common’ at TARA meetings, with 75% disagreeing. One potential source of discord, the different interests arising from owner-occupation versus renting where the freeholder is the same social landlord, did not appear to be particularly strong. Among the 101 respondents from social housing tenants associations only 25% agreed that there were ‘frequently differences between leaseholders and tenants in how they approach the issues discussed in our tenant/resident association’, while 42% disagreed.

Tenants associations in social housing made up only 19% of our sample. Of these, 84% had constitutions approved by the council or social housing provider, 83% had representatives from social landlords at their annual general meetings, and 52% received funds from them.

What TARAs do

There are several ways of finding out what TARAs do. We began by asking a question about the broad purpose of the organisation (see Table 3 on the next page), allowing respondents to choose the top two functions only.

A large majority—77%—chose as a main function the representation of the neighbourhood. Two subsidiary purposes were pursued by our respondents’ associations: giving advice and support to residents (46%), and building and maintaining communal facilities (34%). 93% of respondents belonged to associations that cited at

Table 3
Main purposes of TARAs

| Purpose | Number of associations selecting this purpose | Percentage of respondents |
|---|---|---------------------------|
| Representing the interests of the neighbourhood and its residents | 403 | 77 |
| Giving support, advice or information to residents | 241 | 46 |
| Building or maintaining community spirit among residents | 178 | 34 |
| Providing communal facilities and/or services to residents | 66 | 13 |
| Promoting environmental protection and/or green issues | 54 | 10 |
| Looking after vulnerable and/or disadvantaged residents | 20 | 4 |
| Avoiding or resolving conflicts among residents | 10 | 2 |
| None of the above | 19 | 4 |

Sample size = 527; up to two answers possible

Table 4
Respondents' associations spending 'a lot of time on' specified activities

| | Number of associations selecting this activity | All associations, % | Tenants associations, % | Residents associations, % |
|---|--|---------------------|-------------------------|---------------------------|
| Planning and licensing issues that affect our neighbourhood | 216 | 42 | 30 | 51 |
| Repairs and/or maintenance of buildings | 133 | 27 | 49 | 11 |
| Maintaining and/or developing communal facilities or spaces | 121 | 24 | 26 | 23 |
| Organising social and/or recreational events | 109 | 22 | 13 | 28 |
| Anti-social behaviour, crime and/or noise | 99 | 20 | 25 | 16 |
| Promoting green issues and/or environmental protection | 87 | 17 | 12 | 21 |
| Fire safety and/or prevention | 50 | 10 | 19 | 4 |
| Helping vulnerable and/or disadvantaged people | 48 | 10 | 13 | 7 |

least one of the top three purposes in Table 3 as their main purpose. There was no significant difference between tenants and residents associations in answers to this question.

A second way of assessing the activity of TARAs is to ask how much time they spend on a particular type of activity associated with TARAs (see Table 4). Respondents were asked how much time they spent on a range of activities, choosing from options of 'a lot of time', 'little time', or 'no time'. Here, there are clear differences between tenants and residents associations.

While TARAs in total spend the largest portion of their time on planning and licensing issues, with 42% spending a lot of time on them, tenants associations are less likely (30%) to spend a lot of time on planning and licensing than residents associations (51%). Instead, tenants associations are likely to spend time on issues relating to the repairs and maintenance of buildings (49%). Residents

associations are likely to spend more time on social and recreational events (28%) than tenants associations (13%), and while tenants associations tend to spend most time on repairs, planning and communal spaces (49%, as noted), for residents associations this is occupies less time (11%).

We also asked respondents to identify the most important issue faced in the past five years. Respondents were free to write what they wished and we coded the results. The results were highly variable, including 'a murder on the estate', 'stopping our local doctor's surgery from closing', and 'obtaining the freehold of our block'. Table 5 on the next page presents the results of the discrete coded categories which more than one in 20 respondents (more than 5%) claimed as their biggest issue (the smaller discrete most-important issues are collapsed into the 'other' category).

Again, issues connected with planning permission were the single most important issues for both

tenants and residents associations. However, the concerns of different types of association tend to reflect differences in the character of their memberships. The most important issues for residents are planning permission and parking—60% of them cited these issues as the most important that they have faced compared with only 28% of tenants associations. Fire safety, disagreements with the manager, crime and anti-social behaviour and maintenance together was the top issue for 48% of respondents from tenants associations but only 13% from residents associations.

TARAs as political actors

The concentration of activities around planning, licensing, building repairs and maintenance, as well as anti-social behaviour, noise and crime, suggests that TARAs' external political activities are substantially developed through their relationship with the local council. When we asked our respondents how they had furthered the aims of their association in the past five years, almost all (93%) had contacted a councillor—slightly more residents associations than tenants associations did so (see Table 6). 64% worked together with other TARAs. A large percentage used other means

too—contacting an MP (55%), petition or protest (42%), and contacting the press or media (39%)—while a smaller proportion took legal action (17%), with legal action appearing to be more likely among tenants than residents associations.

The relationship with the council is one of the most important characteristics of the association. We asked respondents about their relationship with their local district, borough or unitary council—whether the council responded well to what they say 'on day-to-day issues'; whether the TARA is 'consulted on important issues'; and whether they felt 'what they said influenced the council' (see Table 7 on the next page). Respondents were more likely to agree than disagree that the council responded well to day-to-day issues and that the TARA was consulted and had influence, but the proportions agreeing with these positive views were below a half, and only around a third agreed that they have influence.

Moreover, the views of residents associations are more likely to be positive in this respect than those of tenants associations. Tenants association respondents were statistically significantly more likely than those from residents associations to disagree that they were consulted on day-to-day

Table 5
Most important issue faced by the association in the past five years (coded)

| | All associations, % | Residents associations, % | Tenants associations, % |
|--|---------------------|---------------------------|-------------------------|
| Planning permission | 37 | 48 | 22 |
| Parking and roads | 10 | 12 | 6 |
| Maintenance/refurbishment | 8 | 3 | 16 |
| Crime/anti-social behaviour | 8 | 6 | 10 |
| Disagreements with landlord/property manager | 6 | 3 | 12 |
| Fire safety | 5 | 1 | 10 |
| Other | 26 | 27 | 26 |
| Total | 505 | 300 | 205 |

Table 6
How TARAs further their aims

| Furthered aims by ... | All associations, % | Residents associations, % | Tenants associations, % |
|-------------------------------|---------------------|---------------------------|-------------------------|
| Contacting a local councillor | 93 | 97 | 88 |
| Working with other TARAs | 64 | 70 | 56 |
| Contacting an MP | 55 | 54 | 56 |
| Petition or protest | 42 | 42 | 43 |
| Contacting the press or media | 39 | 41 | 37 |
| Legal action | 17 | 11 | 26 |

Sample size = 475

Table 7
Relations with the council

| | Agree, % | Neither, % | Disagree, % |
|--|-------------|---------------|----------------|
| Council responds well on day-to-day issues | 48 | 25 | 27 |
| Council consults us on important issues | 40 | 23 | 37 |
| We have influence | 35 | 34 | 31 |

Sample size = 513

issues (32% compared with 24%), that they were consulted on important issues (43% against 33%), and that they had influence (40% against 25%).

Since they are statistically strongly related to each other, the three questions about the relationship between the association and the council can be usefully combined, so that for each of the statements with which the respondent agrees (the council responds well to day-to-day issues, consults on big issues, and is influenced by the association) we add one point to an index of council support. One-third (34%) score 0 on this index, 25% have a score of 1, 21% a score of 2, and 17% the top score of 3, with an average score for all respondents of 1.2. This index is significantly related to the size of the association, with smaller associations having lower average scores—the average score for associations with 300 households or fewer was 1.0; for larger associations it was 1.4.

The index of council support also has quite important relationships with some of the other variables in our survey. Tenants associations have significantly lower scores (average 1.06) than residents associations (1.32). Consequently, those TARAs that spend time on tenancy issues such as repairs and maintenance have much lower scores (0.77) than those that do not (1.34); similarly the small group of TARAs spending a lot of time on fire safety have much lower scores (0.72) than those that do not (1.25). Conversely, associations spending a lot of time on planning and licensing tend to have higher scores (1.40) than those that do not (1.09). Dealings with councils on matters relating to their role as social housing providers tend to produce less positive attitudes towards the council than dealings on planning matters.

The level to which respondents feel supported generally by their council has a wider impact on the association. It appears to encourage participation in the TARA. More (52%) of those scoring 3 on the index of council support agreed that their members were 'keen to be involved in the TARA' than those scoring 2 (31%), 1 (24%), or 0 (21%).

Relations with the council appear to be related to the success of the association in achieving its

objectives, albeit we have to recognise that perceived success might itself shape perceptions of support from the council. If we look at the outcome of the most important issue that respondents' TARAs have faced in the past five years, 22% reported that it had been resolved satisfactorily, 11% reported that it had not, a further 22% wrote that it had been 'partly' resolved, and 35% reported the matter was 'ongoing' (9% said 'other', which included responses such as the issue required 'constant intervention' or that a problem like 'rising sea levels' could not be resolved). There was no significant difference between tenants and residents associations on this measure of success. However, the mean score on the index of council support of those believing that their most important issue was resolved satisfactorily was 1.4, for those believing it was not it was 0.8 (for those saying it was partly resolved 1.3, and for those saying it was ongoing 1.2).

The strategies used for seeking to fulfil their objectives also was related to the general index of council support. TARAs with higher indexes were statistically significantly more likely to further their aims by contacting councillors, contacting the press or media and working together with other TARAs, and less likely to pursue legal action.

Our survey included one short question which sought to gauge the extent to which TARAs regarded councillor partisanship as significant for their association. Interestingly, 47% agreed that councillor party made a difference while 25% disagreed (38% neither agreed nor disagreed). Those that agreed had mean scores of 2.01 on the index of council support, and those that disagreed had mean scores of 0.43. Feeling supported by the council might be related to the perception of the council as a party-politicised environment since more active engagement with the council brings a stronger awareness of the political environment in which councils operate. As one respondent said:

'Running a RA is very hard and unthankful work. Our association has been swamped with issues and residents only half engaged. We have to be non-political, yet work in a highly political environment where it's clear which local councillors support us and those that don't or don't understand the issues of estate living.'

Another noted that:

'Our ward councillors are a great support but they are bound by their political association.'

English TARAs as a southern phenomenon

We now have to confront the point that the survey covers predominantly southern England (78% of respondents), and in particular London and the South East (66% of respondents). The regional imbalance was apparent as we drew up our sample as we found it difficult to find email contact details

for TARAs outside the English south in the numbers we might expect. Birmingham City Council's website (covering a population of 1.15million), for instance, lists just 10 TARAs by name and, while suggesting that an additional 14 might exist, does not name them. In contrast, Camden in London (population 0.26million) lists 300. As discussed above, our attempts to secure the help of councils outside the south and of national organisations to which some TARAs belong produced disappointing results.

Our search for some distinctive features of southern TARAs that might help to explain this under-representation largely drew a blank. Public-sector tenants associations make up a larger portion of the London and South Eastern associations (20%) than in areas outside (18%), but this is not statistically significant. Neither are features such as the legal status (whether a registered charity or registered company) that might indicate a distinctive feature of the TARA ecology north of London. If we look at the functions filled by TARAs in the South East and outside, they are broadly similar tasks—of the priorities set out in Table 3, the only significant difference, and not a huge one, was that TARAs outside London were more likely (40%) to see 'maintaining community spirit' as a main function than those inside London and the South East (30%), and more likely (7%) to see their role as 'looking after vulnerable people' (London and the South East 2%).

One possibility is that property values, higher in the South East, might create extra incentives for 'Nimbysim' and a certain kind of 'homeowner activism'.⁹ Such an argument has at best only limited support from our survey. London and South Eastern TARAs are significantly but not spectacularly more likely to spend a lot of time on planning and licensing issues (48%) than others (34%). Yet, on the other hand, TARAs in London and the South East are also more likely to devote a lot of time to the traditional tenants' issue of repairs and maintenance (33%) than elsewhere (17%). The same absence of a clear and strong regional 'Nimby' effect can be seen in the responses to the question of the biggest issue faced by the TARA in the last five years. While planning issues were cited somewhat more frequently in London (41%) than outside (27%), parking and roads are bigger issues outside London and the South East (15%) than they are within it (6%).

One particular feature of London that might make it more likely to be home to TARAs is the fact that it is largely 'unparished', i.e. without parish councils—statutory representative bodies not included in our sample that can fulfil many of the representative and social functions of TARAs. London has traditionally been unparished, although since the introduction of the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007 it has been possible to set them

up. There is now (since 2012) just one: Queen's Park Community Council. Moreover, 'many local authority district councils adjoining London, such as Epsom & Ewell, Thurrock, Runcymede and Watford, have no parish councils'.¹⁰

If we take the nine traditional economic regions and correlate the number of community/parish councils per million inhabitants (as set out in the Oscar database¹¹) with the respondents to our survey per million, there is a clear tendency for the parished areas to be under-represented in our sample (correlation of -0.48). Yet this is entirely due to London as an outlier: exclude London and the correlation turns positive, at $+0.38$. While it is widely accepted that TARA numbers appear to have been in decline throughout England (discussed below), the signs of organisational decline do not appear to be particularly greater outside London and the South East.

TARAs in London and the South East were somewhat less likely to be run by older people (60% of respondents were aged over 65) than elsewhere (71%). They were no more likely to be female (42% compared with 41%). Covid did have a significantly bigger impact on the activity of TARAs outside London and the South East; within it 53% said their association 'carried on as normal' during the Covid crisis, compared with 33% outside.

Yet the differences between TARAs in London and those in the South East are also at least as significant as the differences between those in London and the South East and those in the remainder of England. For instance, respondents from the South East are significantly more likely to be from residents as opposed to tenants organisations than London (68% compared with 50%).

In short, none of the answers given in response to our questions suggest a different environment for TARAs in the south sufficiently strong to explain such a large over-representation in our sample.

On the other hand, there are a reasons to take seriously the argument that this regional imbalance might not simply be an artefact of the way that the survey was administered and reflects a true regional imbalance. One is that, as discussed above, we made many unsuccessful efforts specifically to increase the numbers of TARAs from areas other than the South in our sample and among respondents.

Another is that a finding of regional imbalance does fit with some less hard evidence available. Only 20 of the 66 associations set out in the membership list of the National Organisation of Residents Associations¹² were located outside London, the South West, and South East. In interview the Director of the Federation of Private Residents' Associations (with over 500 members) told us that 'most of the members of the Federation are based in London and the South East' and a northern-based secretary of a residents association who was a regional organiser for the Federation pointed out



'TARAs exist within an ecology of local organisations and informal groupings where the distinctions between types are not always clear'

that 'that there were very few members in the North of England'.

Another reason is that there is some evidence from the NCVO⁶ that other kinds of voluntary organisations are more dense on the ground in London, the South East and the South West than one would expect on the basis of population, and fewer outside¹³—albeit on a lower scale of over-representation than that set out in Table 1 above.

The slow death of TARAs?

A range of commentators have suggested that TARAs are in decline.¹⁴ Since we have no cross-time data on this matter we cannot document a decline.

Many of the freehand comments we invited at the end of our questionnaire pointed to the respondent's association struggling to survive. For instance, one East Midlands respondent wrote that their TARA 'is currently dissolved and trying to re-establish but [there are] some difficulties with forming a committee', and even a respondent from a highly active TARA in Sheffield pointed to increasing difficulties:

'I have been involved with the TARA for 30 years ... [I have] seen the demise of many TARAs because they have not adapted and embraced change. Also the Covid pandemic has closed a lot of TARAs as they were run by Committees who were elderly (70 years plus) and because of being 'stuck in their ways' new, younger people are not getting involved. 30 years ago we were one of the largest TARAs in Sheffield; due to demolition and changes on the estate we are now one of

the smallest but we are still one of the busiest, providing services and events 50 weeks a year. In Sheffield during the Covid pandemic we were one of only two TARAs that stayed open.'

Covid provided a substantial barrier to the development of TARA activity. While 46% of our respondents told us that TARA activity carried on during the pandemic, 54% reported some disruption—half of those affected (27% of the sample) believed that the disruption was over by the time of our questionnaire (February 2022), nearly half (26%) said that the disruption was still significant or severe, but only 2% said that the disruption was likely to be permanent.

If there is a decline, one of the prominent candidates for explaining it is the apparent change in mechanisms of representation, from collective engagement through TARAs to more individual forms, where the 'exercise of consumer influence and the expectation of service quality have been enshrined as new constitutional rights for the users of public services'.¹⁵ Related to this is the argument that new technologies of consultation—social media, the possibility of direct contact through emails, and easily constructed and delivered questionnaires, as well as online meetings—appear to be adopted as, from the freeholder perspective, attractive forms of participation, making interactions 'rather more arms-length, relying on survey responses and data analytics' and at least introducing the suspicion that 'reduced face-to-face contact risks losing touch with the multi-dimensional complexity of tenants' day-to-day lives'.



Changing modes of consultation may be a factor in the apparent decline in the number of TARAs

Moreover, there are now a range of different council- or housing association-run consultative mechanisms, including tenant representation on governing bodies.¹⁶ There are also changing modes of consultation, including incorporating tenants on governing boards of associations or a wide range of tenant and resident engagement forums.¹⁶

We would expect such changes to produce stronger declines in the numbers of tenants associations, compared with residents associations, although the latter share some other challenges with tenant bodies. It is instructive that we were contacted by a residents association from a Yorkshire city some months after our survey to tell us that their council had terminated its grant to support the running of the association with no notice or consultation and announced this as a 'saving arising from the introduction of new approaches to resident engagement'.

While some of the other candidates for decline are found in the comments of residents associations too (participation being an older person's game and the difficulties of recruiting young people; an increasingly mobile population; the rise of Airbnb and second-homeownership), some of our evidence is consistent with a disproportionately stronger decline in public-sector TARA involvement. Public-sector tenants associations were less likely to have carried on during the Covid epidemic (31% compared with 41% in other TARAs), less likely to report enthusiasm of neighbours for their work (22% against 32%), and less likely to report a satisfactory outcome to their most pressing issue in the past five years (13% against 26%).

Yet other aspects of our finding point in a different direction—public-sector tenants associations are less likely to be run by the over-65s (43% against 69% of other TARAs). While such public-sector tenants associations now seem to constitute a small portion of TARAs (19% of our respondents were

from them), their numbers are only held so high because of the larger number of such organisations in London (rather than London and the South East), where they constituted 26% of respondents: without London, public-sector TARAs made up only 14% of our respondents.

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Notes

- 1 PA Jones: *Housing Scoping Paper: Tenants and Residents Associations and Community-Based Organisations*. Briefing Paper 18. Third Sector Research Centre, University of Birmingham, 2010. www.birmingham.ac.uk/documents/college-social-sciences/social-policy/tsrc/working-papers/briefing-paper-18.pdf
- 2 See the discussion in L Cairncross, D Clapham and R Goodlad: 'The origins and activities of tenants' associations in Britain'. *Urban Studies*, 1992, Vol. 29(5), 709–25
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