



Tenant Voice Sponsor



Tenant Voice on Covid-19

- Phase 3

December 2020

www.tpas.cymru

This report is phase 3 of a series that looks at tenants' experiences across Wales in relation to the Covid-19 pandemic. The aim of this report is to understand how the pandemic has impacted on people's lives and what tenants consider important to them when it comes to landlord engagement and support.

Three hundred and sixty-eight tenants responded to this survey from all twenty-two Local Authority areas in Wales, and whilst we acknowledge that this is not representative of the whole tenant population, we are confident that the findings offer valuable insight.

It is our hope that this report will serve as a basis to help landlords shape their services in line with tenant expectations and perceptions during such uncertain times.

Key Findings:

- Housing Associations have the highest representation of tenants to have completed this survey. This is consistent with our phase one and two of the 'Tenant Voice on Covid-19' report sequence
- Tenants are unaware of what is going on in their community in terms of minimising loneliness and isolation
- Tenants across tenures want more information, communication, and support from their landlords
- There are additional expenses for tenants relating directly to Covid-19 including internet usage and the cost of online shopping delivery
- Low income and rent increases are impacting tenant's ability to pay their rent and bills
- Tenants have become more comfortable allowing repairs and maintenance in their homes since the beginning of the pandemic
- Tenants want landlords' priorities in the future to centre around communication, the quality of their home, support managing financial difficulties and tackling anti-social behaviour

Overview of tenants' experiences of the Covid-19 pandemic

Over the last eight months, tenants have shared their experiences with us over a series of three surveys: April, June, and November 2020. We have seen an increase in awareness from tenants in terms of knowledge of what they need to do if they are unable to pay their rent, as well as seeing a significant boost in the use of digital methods. The concerns of tenants have changed over time, with an initial focus on becoming unwell, then a shift towards being unable to pay their bills.

Whilst we are unaware of the precise impact of Covid-19 on tenants' thoughts and feelings, there has been a considerable transformation in thinking in terms of allowing access for repairs and maintenance. It is apparent that tenants now feel more comfortable allowing access to their home. In March, 43% of tenants told us they would not feel comfortable allowing access for essential maintenance; compared to only 11% in November.

Whilst over half of tenants (57%) feel that paying their rent is not a concern to them, those that were struggling related it to their rent going up at a faster pace than their income.

Tenants in social housing and in the private sector would like more information about community activities to minimise loneliness and isolation. This is consistent with the first survey we carried out at the beginning of the pandemic where 76% of tenants were not aware of any landlord activities to support them. We have seen an increase in awareness, although 60% of social housing tenants and 50% of private tenants still felt that there is a need for more information.

Research methods

Using our Tenant Pulse platform, we carried out an online survey in October 2020. Tenants from across tenures were asked about their experiences in relation to the Covid-19 pandemic, following previous surveys in April and June 2020. There were 368 responses covering all 22 Local Authority areas (see Appendix A). There were 219 Housing Association tenants, 96 Local Authority tenants, 32 Private tenants, 6 supported housing and 15 others (see Appendix B).

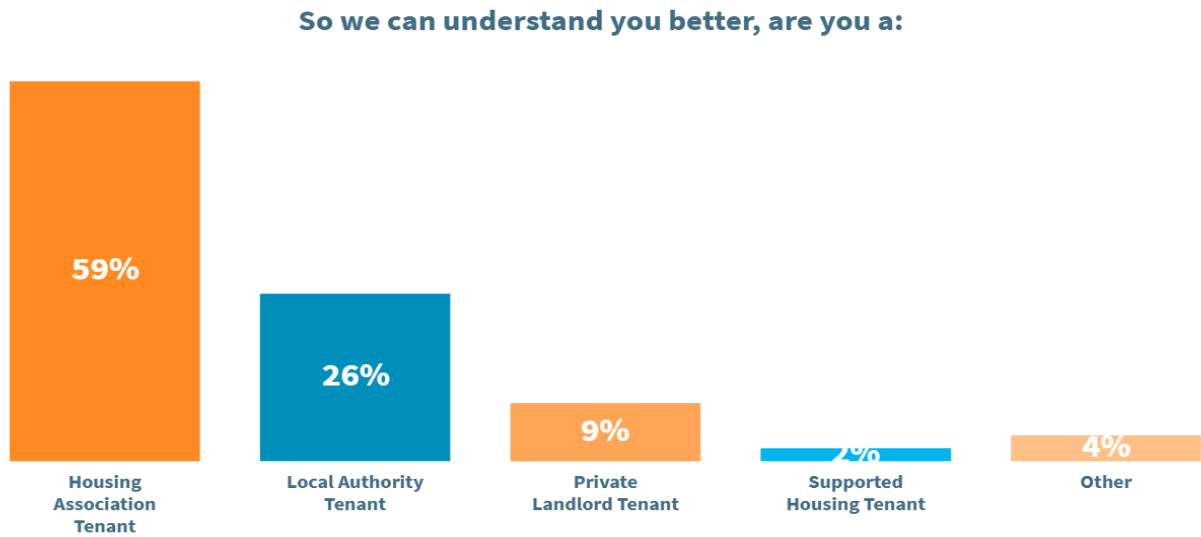
Respondents

59% of respondents were housing association tenants which is consistent with the first survey in March.

The response from Local Authority tenants has increased slightly and there has been a significant decrease in private tenants with an 9% response rate compared to the previous survey where we had a 16% response rate over 496 tenants.

Local authority area of responders

Whilst the survey had representation from all 22 Local Authority areas, the highest representation was in the Vale of Glamorgan with 14%, whilst Cardiff had 11%, despite the vast difference in population in the two areas. 37% of the 50 responses in the Vale of Glamorgan were from Local Authority tenants.



Since the previous survey, there has been an evident increase in responses from Ceredigion, three quarters of which are from Housing Association Tenants. Conwy responses have decreased but they remain in the top 5.

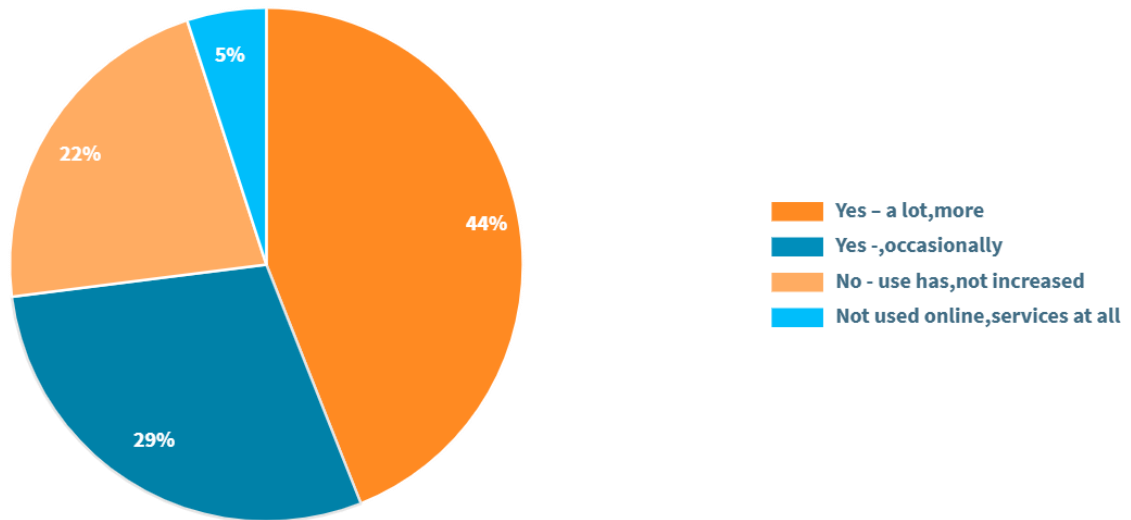
Summary of findings

The findings are summarised under the following five themes.

1. The use of online services in lockdown

Almost half of the respondents (44%) said that they have used online services more than they had previously. Of those that answered 'no', 26% were housing associations, and 32% were local authorities.

Since the pandemic have you started to use online services more than you did previously?



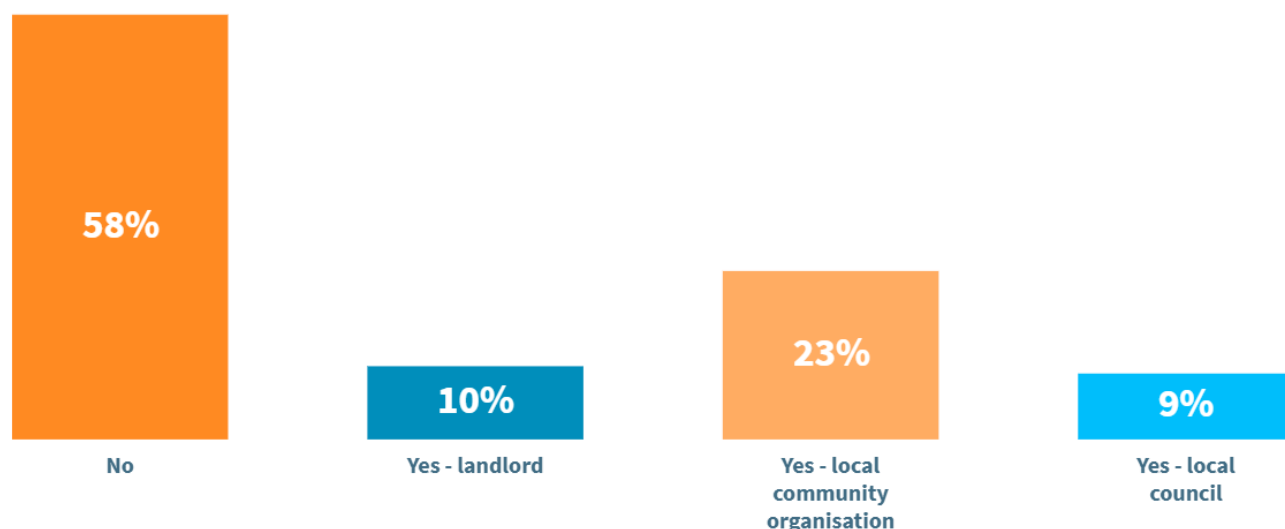
Highest responding areas	Lowest responding areas
1. Vale of Glamorgan	17. Gwynedd/Neath
2. Cardiff	18. Caerphilly/Torfaen
3. Swansea	19. Merthyr Tydfil
4. RCT	20. Wrexham
5. Powys/Conwy	21. Flintshire
6. Ceredigion	22. Ynys Mon

These findings were consistent with those in our phase 2 survey in May, where 45% of respondents had used online services a lot more. Within this survey, there was a slight variation across HA tenants and LA tenants who responded 'no'. 32% of responds to state 'no' or 'not at all' were LA tenants, compared to 26% of housing association tenants, although we note that this may be related to the sample size.

2. Community engagement to minimise loneliness and isolation

58% of cross tenure tenants had not seen anything happening within their community to make people feel less isolated.

Have you seen anything happening in your community that will help people to feel less isolated?



There was a noticeable difference in the responses of private rental tenants and HA tenants. 33% of respondents in the private sector had seen things happening in their local community organisation compared to only 18% of HA tenants and 29% of LA tenants. In terms of landlord community activities, 15% of HA respondents and 3% of LA respondents had observed events.

However, when observing the comments based on tenure, it was clear that perception of 'community' was varied. Private tenants view their local area as their community whereas social housing tenants identified their community as the housing estate or housing complex that they live in.

In some cases, tenants suggested that they would benefit from community engagement, but it has not happened.

"I am new to the area. However, speaking with close family with a young family and older relatives, they are not aware of anything happening in our community that would help people feel better. Particularly parents of younger children and older, less mobile people are more adversely affected by the lack of peer contacts"

"I have not seen anything different, I used to get a call from home support after my husband died, but not recently"

"specific groups are being supported, but if you aren't part of an official at-risk group, it's been too easy to overlook the outliers"

"I live in a sheltered housing complex, we have always had a lot of activities throughout the week, we have had none since March, we don't even meet in the dining room now either, it just seems to get worse as the weeks go by"

"Life seems to be much as usual. I am single and do not have any family and so tend to feel a bit left out as emphasis is always on people wanting to meet and socialise with family. When socialising is restricted, there seems no-one for me to socialise with"

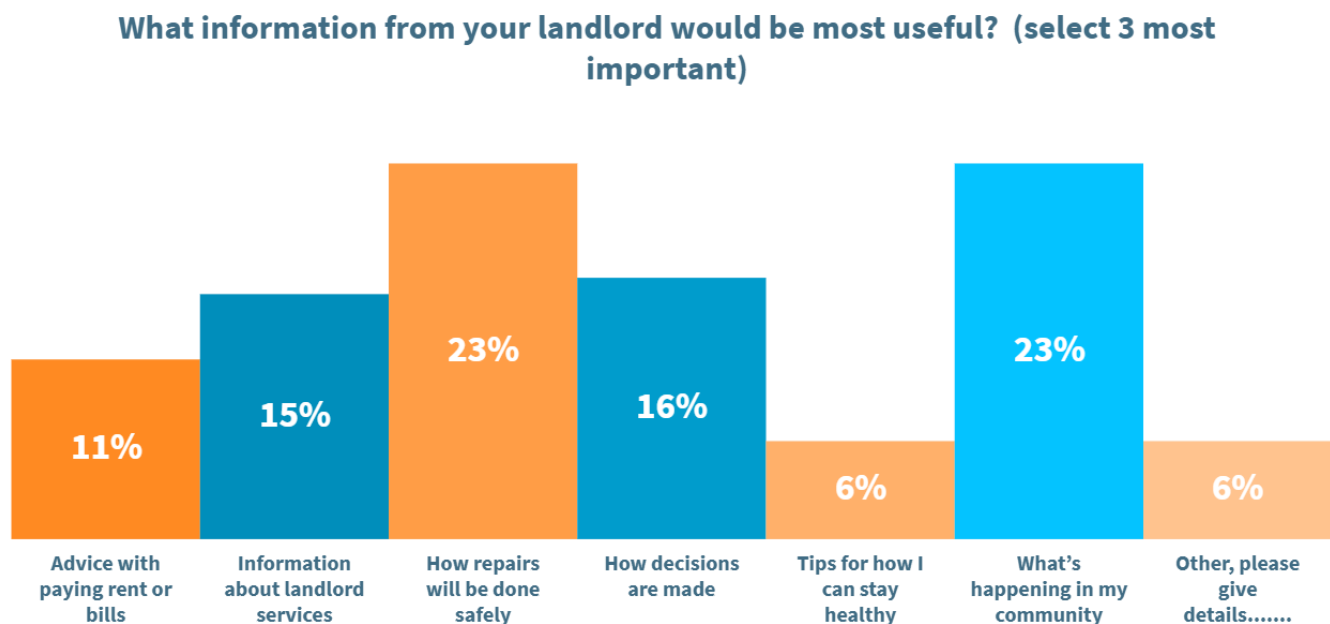
3. Information most useful for tenants

Tenants identified the following three areas as the most important to them in terms of information sharing.

1. How repairs are done safely / what is happening in your community (23%)
2. How decisions are made (16%)
3. Information about landlord services (15%)

Consistent with the previous question, respondents felt that information on community activities is highly important to them. Unlike the previous survey where community was not deemed as important as repairs or information about landlord services; respondents now feel that information on community activities was equally as important as safe repairs.

There were no differences between HA and LA respondents, with both deeming information about what is happening in the community to be of the most important to them.



Tenants emphasised the reduction in household repairs during the pandemic, and a lack of support from landlords.

"My social landlord is usually excellent yet other than being informed they are following the restrictions to the letter they have not been in contact"

"A letter or phone call would be appreciated from my landlord to make sure they were ok living with the virus, some haven't got family support"

"Poor show household repairs can't be carried out unless they deem necessary...window frozen and can't close! But they send a surveyor out to do an energy survey"

Respondents highlighted the need for regular progress updates from their landlords.

"I think that people would be more comfortable knowing that these things are being dealt with and they have no reason to worry".

"More on what's ACTUALLY happening and being done for us"

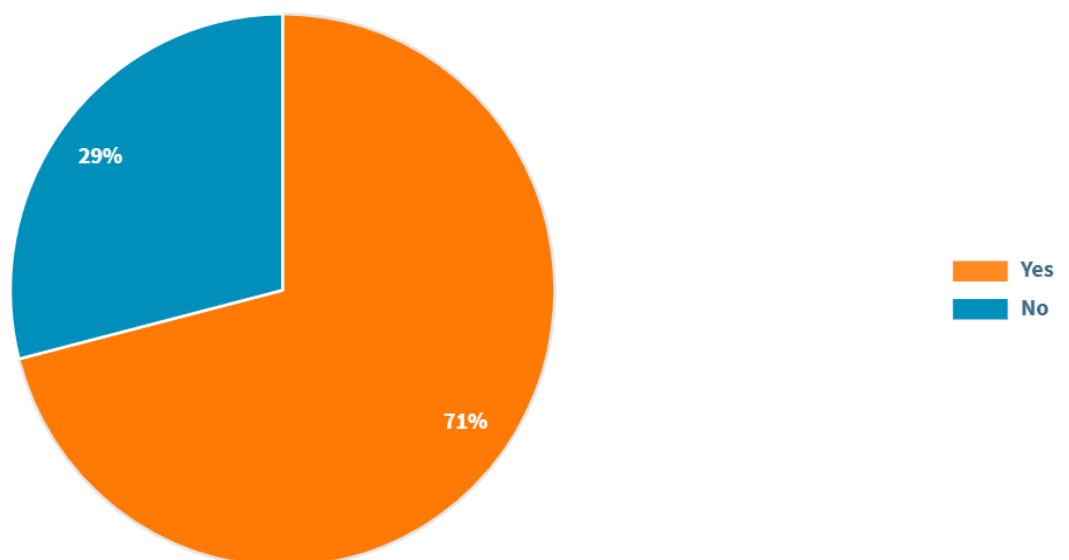
"just to communicate more, often, frequently and fuller information"

"How to chase up repairs reported just before March lockdown that haven't been seen to - which has led us to pay for some repairs ourselves to make area safe."

4. The understanding of what to do if rent cannot be paid

Over a quarter of respondents (29%) were unsure of the steps they need to take if they are unable to pay their rent.

If you are unable to pay your rent, do you know what to do? Please tell us more in the comments box



This figure has, however, decreased since our phase 1 and phase 2 survey, where 35% of respondents were unaware of what to do if they were unable to pay their rent. When comparing the responses from HA, LAs and

private tenants, LA tenants were the most informed (76%), private tenants (64%) knew what to do and HA (70%) knew what to do in these circumstances.

The Tenants who responded no to this question emphasised two main points:

Their rent was paid through benefits, so unaware of the process.

"My rent is paid for by housing benefit"

"mine goes directly out of my Universal Credit each month"

They hadn't received information from their landlords.

"I live in shared ownership so have no idea what to do. I've never been given that information"

"if I was in the position as to not pay my rent, I would have no idea as to the next step other than contacting them"

5. Causes of difficulties in paying rent

Over half of respondents (59%) were not facing any difficulties with paying rent and bills.

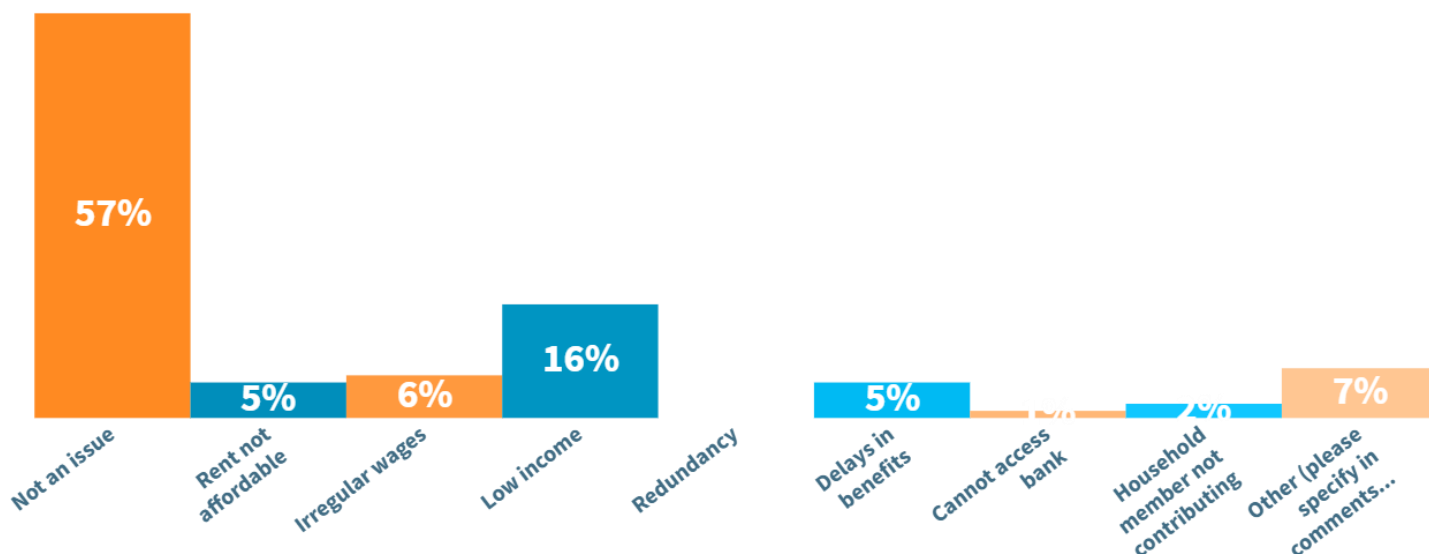
Those that were struggling, suggested that low income (16%) was the biggest factor.

"My rent & bill's keep increasing, & I keep trying to go to cheaper accommodation (by bidding) but I am 69 yrs old & very alone & miles away from my family & any support & they tell me I don't qualify, So I never get anywhere, & my depression just gets worse with all the problems"

"Mainly for me is only one wage to cover everything I cope reasonably well but council tax is the bane of my life"

"Benefits need to be higher than they are, as they are below poverty level and below what the government has said is minimum living wage. Increase the benefits"

If you are struggling to pay rent/bills what is causing this?



Those that responded 'other' had emphasised the cost implication relating to the Covid-19 pandemic

"As a single adult household my outgoings have gone up slightly as I can't work from home and for part of the lockdown couldn't visit family. I work shifts so it wasn't always possible to get to the shops during the reduced opening times so relied on delivery meals which are higher costs. Government has provided support for low incomes which I don't fall under but nothing for others who are still working harder than ever".

"Part-time job was furloughed now finished leading to future uncertainty as to own income as pension date seems further away than ever. This increase in digital usage has led to much higher phone bills that now have to be re-arranged on terms that may prove to be unfavourable in the long term".

"Increase in costs for shopping online, electricity and heating. Having to put up security camera due to not having a secure garden. Repairs cannot be undertaken until after covid. These extra costs put me in a position of having to cut back on essential living costs"

There were no significant differences between tenures.

6. Access for repairs and maintenance

89% of respondents felt comfortable allowing maintenance teams in their homes. Of the respondents who were comfortable with this, there was a consistent theme in the importance of safety measures for both the maintenance teams and their families.

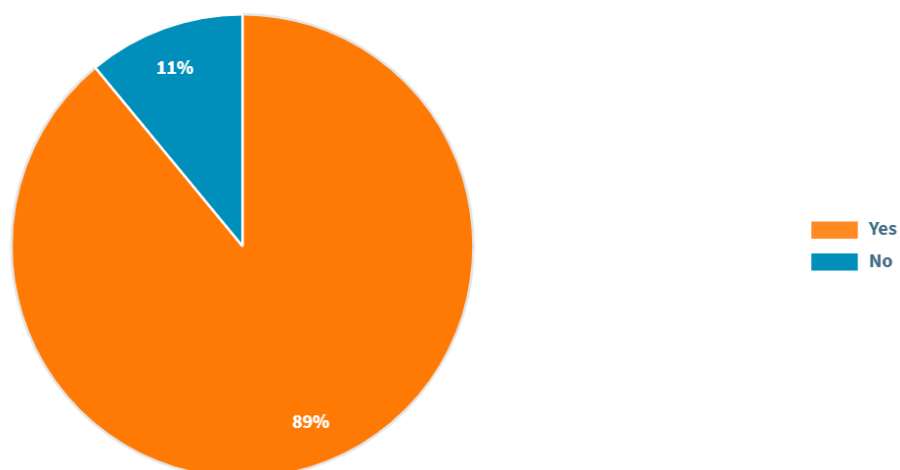
"I am comfortable, but the workers must learn to keep their masks on properly"

"ensure all workers have adequate PPE provisions"

"have all safety procedures in place - temperature, masks, hand gel and full PPE where necessary; the rules are enforced and a member of staff or a carer will escort the person to your flat and stay with them, if necessary"

"Ask workmen to wear masks at 1st point of contact at front door. Once indoors and working on the problem and I could be in another room, then I wouldn't mind them removing their masks to work"

Are you comfortable allowing general repairs and maintenance to be carried out inside your home?



The 11% of respondents who did not feel comfortable allowing repairs provided further information why. These fell into 2 main categories:

- 1) Highly vulnerable due to illness
- 2) Increased anxiety

"I wouldn't be. I was previously shielding I won't have someone who's interacting with hundreds of people in the community being in an enclosed space, one I'm stuck in"

"wait until I am no longer self-isolating"

"Nothing! It's more my problem with anxiety"

"Nothing really, it's my anxiety causing it"

There has been a significant shift in respondents' perceptions since our phase one survey where less than half (49%) of the respondents would have felt comfortable allowing repairs and maintenance. This increased in phase two when 84% stated they would be comfortable. 92% of HA tenants and 92% of LA tenants comfortable, compared with only 71% of private tenants.

Priorities for the future

Respondents were asked what their landlords' priorities should be in the future and there were four key themes emerging from the comments:

- 1) Communication with tenants
- 2) Improving the quality of homes
- 3) Sustaining tenancies
- 4) Tackling anti-social behaviour

Communication to tenants

Communication with tenants was seemingly the most important to tenants throughout this question with a clear focus on minimising isolation, increasing support, keeping informed and improving communities.

"Guarding tenants against loneliness and lack of awareness, both of their own condition and what services are available".

"Treating tenants who are struggling with dignity and a bit more understanding"

"When new housing officer is in place, maybe calling on the locals and introducing who they are, offering help when needed. Not left in the dark as who is in charge"

"I think they should be in more contact making sure the tenants are okay and reassuring them that the landlord is aware of all government guidance and how it relates to their tenants"

"Keep tenants informed on any likely repairs or updates, instead of just posting through letter boxes a standard oblique letter"

"To act as if their tenants matter, at the moment I and most of my neighbours feel abandoned but then that was the case before the virus hit"

Improving quality of homes

Improving the quality of homes centred around repairs and maintenance with a focus on outstanding repairs, and the safety and warmth of the home.

"Ensuring repairs are carried out to reduce his tenant's outgoings and their comfort. If we have to stay home it would be nice not to watch the rain running down the walls INSIDE"

"Personally, and hearing the same problem from a lot of tenants, repairs and maintenance are what is talked about most, To get them done quickly and fixed first time"

"Bringing older properties up to the standard, where possible, of new housing stock."

"Ensuring tenants are living in a suitably repaired safe secure property"

Sustaining tenancies

Respondents highlighted the need for financial support to enable tenants to keep their homes following loss of income.

"Keeping people who are normally good tenants in their homes. With loss of jobs or reduction in income, showing them where to get help, and/or allowing extra time to pay"

"help those struggling with debt"

"Ensuring people who have lost jobs and are struggling to make ends meet are priority"

Tackling anti-social behaviour

Anti-social behaviour made up a small amount of the responses and was often embedded in comments around communication.

"Making sure there is no anti-social behaviour happening within the community"

"Antisocial and harassment neighbour issues"

"Support tenants who are having difficulties with their neighbours and find out why so it can be resolved"

Conclusion

This report has shown that communication with tenants has never been more important. Covid-19 has decreased the level of human contact people are having and tenants across tenures feel that they would benefit from their landlord providing more support and updates on a regular basis. Tenants highlighted the importance of minimising loneliness and using simple methods such as a phone call to keep well-being high.

When considering the digital inclusion initiative, this report suggests significant improvements in online activity, with 73% of respondents using digital methods more than they did prior to the pandemic. It should be noted, however, that this could be directly linked to only using online survey methods. No printed version was available to post due to Covid-19 restrictions.

Tenants in social housing who felt that they were struggling with their rent had linked it with low income; with factors including their rent rising higher than their income. Joseph Rowntree Foundation found that rent increases in the social housing sector had resulted in 40,000 social renters being pulled into poverty. These findings highlight the importance of expanding awareness on what affordability means to tenants when examining a new rent model for Wales to ensure rents are not outpacing income.

Additional factors were linked to unexpected costs relating to the pandemic, including increased internet usage and online shopping charges. This is an area that needs further exploration as we are currently unaware of the length of time Covid-19 restrictions will be in place.

Tenants perceptions have changed drastically since the beginning of the pandemic. 35% more tenants stated that they would now feel comfortable allowing workers in their homes if the correct safety measures were in place. This includes face masks, social distancing measures and hand sanitisers. It was clear that those that were not allowing access was directly related to being highly vulnerable and suffering with anxiety. This anxiety may well be exacerbated by the current climate.

Increasing communication with tenants will ensure that they feel fully informed and supported. The issues tenants are currently facing in terms of increased loneliness and isolation can be decreased by landlords who are in a unique position to offer support to tenants during such uncertain times. The running theme throughout this entire report was the need for additional communication which interlinks with all the factors that tenants would like to see from their landlords in the future.

References

Joseph Rowntree Foundation: <https://www.jrf.org.uk/report/poverty-wales-2020>

Acknowledgements

We would like to take this opportunity to thank our Tenant Pulse panel for their continuous inspiration and commitment to taking part in our surveys. Your input is truly valued and helps to shape the future of housing.

We would also like to thank Welsh Government for part funding TPAS Cymru as an organisation and to Wales & West for the year-round lead sponsorship.

About TPAS Cymru



TPAS Cymru has supported tenants and landlords in Wales for over 30 years developing effective tenant and community participation through training, support, practical projects and policy development. Locally we support community empowerment through practical advice, support, training and project work.

At Government level, we contribute to policy changes by working with partner organisations to ensure the tenant voice influences decision making.



Tenant Pulse is the voice of tenants in Wales. www.tpas.cymru/pulse. It's been created by TPAS Cymru and is supported by Welsh Government.

We aim to:

- i) Find out what matters most to tenants
- ii) Release regular surveys
- iii) Hold prize draws to reward people who take part

The results of our surveys are used by decision makers to create housing policy which works for tenants, and which helps make housing in Wales safer and fairer.

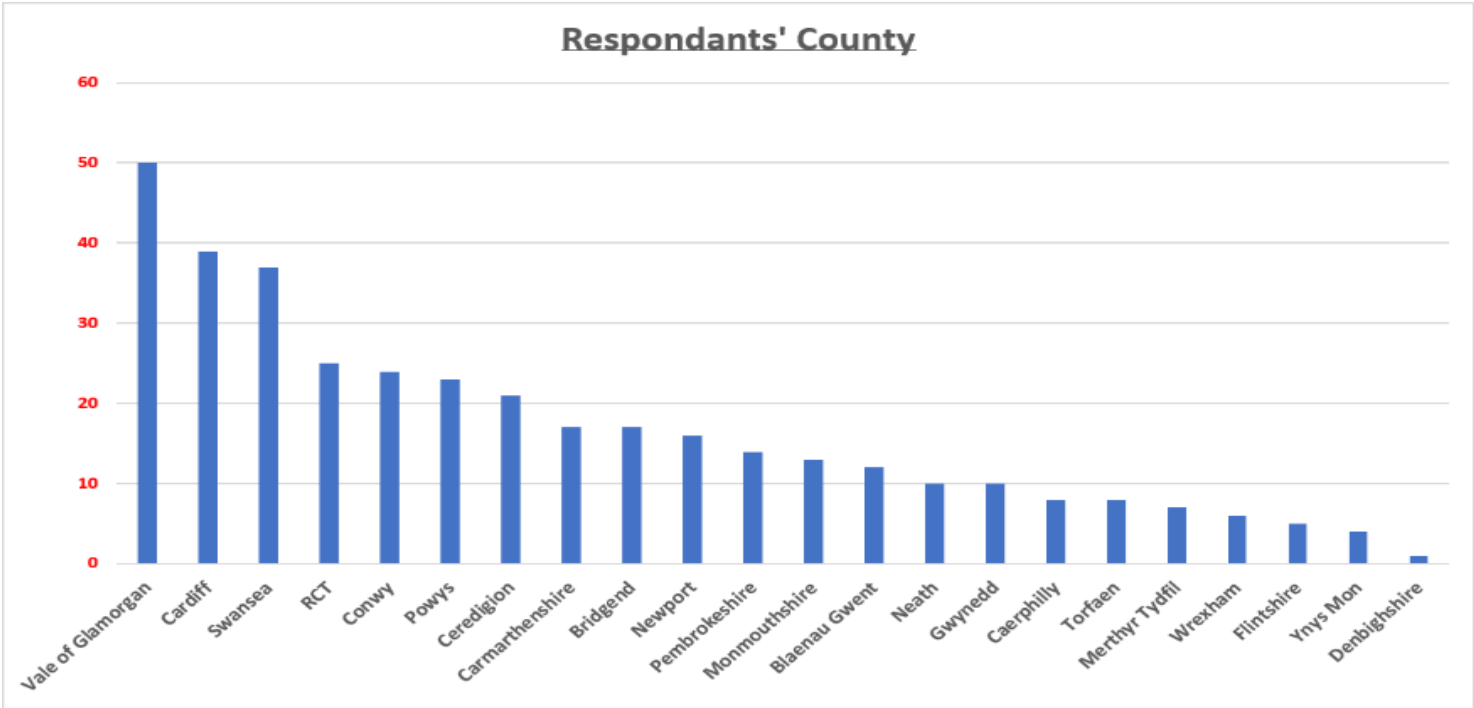
Tenant Voice sponsor



Tenant Pulse is part of program of a work looking to amplifying the voice of tenants. We are very grateful for Pobl Group who sponsor this work.

To meet one of our team to discuss the points raised, please contact: Elizabeth Taylor on Elizabeth@tpas.cymru

Appendix A



Appendix B

So we can understand you better, are you a:

