

## Good Practice in Resident Scrutiny

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### 1. Introduction

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This paper addresses the nine aspects of Resident Scrutiny. That is:

- How social housing residents and their landlord bodies<sup>1</sup> ensure that Resident Scrutiny is *embedded* in the organisation's culture?
- How Resident Scrutiny's *impact* is measured and outcomes from this
- How it is ensured that the outcomes from Resident Scrutiny is *heard and acted upon* within Social Housing Organisations
- How recommendations from Resident Scrutiny are *monitored for action*
- How outcomes from Resident Scrutiny are *communicated to the wider resident body*
- How the work of Resident Scrutiny is *promoted across the wider resident body*
- How *Value for Money* of Resident Scrutiny is determined and outcomes from this
- What *Social Value* has been achieved through Resident Scrutiny
- The *features of best practice* in Resident Scrutiny now and going forward under modern circumstances – e.g. use of communications technology, other

### 2. How social housing residents and their landlord bodies ensure that Resident Scrutiny is *embedded* in the organisation's culture?

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Unlike other business operations within the social housing sector, scrutiny requires a different approach, one which focuses on the needs of the tenant as a customer, and ensures efficiency throughout all of the services offered by the housing provider. The success therefore of scrutiny is dependent on the process being embedded in an organisation's culture, whereby those working within landlord bodies know, understand and have the ability to respond to their current and future customers' needs. This is, founded on knowledge of and commitment to the concept of tenants as customers and the understanding that tenants can make an important contribution to their landlord's performance (Chartered Institute of Housing (CIH nd.,). This shift in the approach to tenants, can be a challenge for both the tenant-body and the housing provider, as such it should be managed in a collaborative manner, with commitment from all stakeholders.

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<sup>1</sup> Housing Association, stock retaining Local Authority and/or ALMO

Wider tenant participation must be encouraged through a mind-set within the organisation, based on the value of this process for both tenants and the landlord organisation. All parties need to understand that this is not a new way of working, or a discrete element of the housing process, rather it has to be a culture within the housing sector (Hickman and Preece 2019). To embed the process in an organisation's culture, it is crucial that all personnel have sufficient education and training to ask what can sometimes be difficult questions and to take a holistic view of the services being offered, focusing on all elements of the service being offered, and critically examining the quality of that service, whilst also recognising ways in which the service can be improved in terms of value, quality, cost and time. Senior management must also ensure that there are sufficient resources available to those on the frontline to enable all personnel to devote the time and energy required in achieving the objectives of tenant scrutiny (CIH nd.,). Such resources should be developed based on open communication between senior management and frontline staff.

Aside from education and training, personnel within landlord bodies need guidance from senior management in terms of clear objectives of tenant engagement and willingness to improve, to empower all personnel to understand and respond to the needs of what is invariably a diverse customer-base (CIH nd.,). An example of best practice is AmicusHorizon, one of the best performing landlord organisations in the United Kingdom (UK), based on resident feedback. This has been achieved by ensuring that all staff, Board members and residents have embedded a 'One Team' culture, seeking to improve services through collaborative working rather than relying on the traditional divide between provider and tenant. The organisation reinforces this collaborative working approach by ensuring that all stakeholders undergo identical training, which enhances the ability of the team to work towards a clearly defined set of goals. This collaborative approach underpins all aspects of the organisation's operation, and as a result the focus on resident engagement has created a very productive working environment (Manzi et al., nd.).

It is also important to view the Resident Scrutiny process from the tenants' perspective, firstly by ensuring that all tenants are aware of the process, and feel welcome to participate in this process. However in some cases it is recognised that this is also relatively new process for tenants, and many may need training and support to ensure that they understand the landlords' operations, and the constraints on such services. The commitment to the effectiveness of scrutiny can therefore be embedded in the customer-base by good communication and understanding of the roles between different groups and activities, and with existing tenants encouraging new tenants to participate (CIH nd., ).

Once training and education are addressed on each side, it is argued that having a Tenants Charter as a baseline of required performance can be a good starting point in terms of embedment in both the landlord and the tenant's culture. This document provides an effective communication medium for both staff and tenants, embedding a local regulatory framework for scrutiny into the landlords' approach to governance and performance management, and creating a culture of enhanced involvement and effective tenant scrutiny throughout the organisation, from senior management to frontline staff (CIH nd., Hickman and Preece 2019).

### **3. How Resident Scrutiny's *impact* is measured and outcomes from this**

It is argued that one of the most difficult aspects of Resident Scrutiny is deciding on the variables that are to be measured to test whether the process is effective, and ways in which it can be improved. Given that Resident Scrutiny can be viewed from several perspectives, namely that of the resident, that of frontline workers and that of the landlord organisation, it is vital that the variables measured represent all three elements of the process.

Despite the importance of this element of Resident Scrutiny, a critical and robust review of social housing landlords' approaches to tenant participation was conducted by Hickman and Preece (2019), who found that a key barrier to the effectiveness of resident scrutiny is that few landlords have a mechanism in place for assessing the impact of their tenant participation initiatives. This was attributed to the fact that many organisations are trying to improve the service offered to tenants without clearly defined objectives or required outcomes on which to measure the impacts of the process. At the same time it is recognised that it can be challenging to quantify and essentially monetise the intangible social benefits of greater tenant participation. For instance it is difficult to measure the enhanced feelings of safety and inclusiveness which results from tenant participation.

That said, it is argued that the scrutiny process can include service-specific scrutiny, where customers examine a particular service or policy, or the process can involve scrutiny of a range of activities, with performance assessed on a regular and systematic basis. Progress can therefore be measured by comparing performance against the previous quarter's performance, examining performance data to understand the trends and using such information to identify improvements and problem areas which need further work. The important point being that impact is measured regularly because scrutiny is an ongoing process designed to facilitate continual improvement within the organisation (CIH nd.).

The impact of the resident scrutiny measures can also be assessed using a customer survey, with star ratings for satisfaction. This method is relatively easy to conduct and the data can provide valuable evidence in terms of what is working and what needs greater attention (CIH 2014).

It is equally important to carry out impact assessments from the landlord's organisation, particularly from frontline workers to gather their views on the effectiveness of resident involvement activity (Pawson et al., 2012). This can take the form of a survey, the provision of a forum within which key personnel can discuss and evaluate what measures are effective, and which measures need revision to make improvements in the service being offered. This process requires support and resources from senior management and a no-blame culture to facilitate open discussion (Richardson et al., 2014). From an organisational viewpoint, the impact of the process can be measured in terms of reduced costs, and fewer complaints, with higher levels of customer satisfaction (CIH 2014).

#### **4. How it is ensured that the outcomes from Resident Scrutiny is *heard and acted upon* within Social Housing Organisations**

A key part of the effectiveness of any management process targeting better customer service is ensuring that the needs of the customer are understood, and acted upon. Without such action, the Scrutiny Panel and the tenant-base will lose confidence in the process and make it more difficult to recruit volunteers. It is argued therefore that in terms of ensuring that the outcomes of the resident scrutiny are heard and acted upon within social housing organisations, it is essential to understand the process from both the specialist posts created as part of the scrutiny process, and the relevant action of mainstream personnel also involved with residents. In other words customer satisfaction must be a culture within the organisation, and not simply confined to those frontline workers responsible for organising the resident scrutiny process. This can be achieved by including process outcomes in annual reports including for example the number of residents becoming involved in Resident Scrutiny, and the type of engagement over specific periods of time (Pawson et al., 2012).

The CIH (2014) highlight several cases of best practice which provide an insight into ways in which the scrutiny outcomes are addressed by the housing organisation. For example Nottingham City Homes asks residents to rate the service being provided using a 4-star system across three areas, namely the home/property, the neighbourhood and the service provided. The feedback is then assessed by service managers to determine how the service rates against each of promised outcomes. The Resident Scrutiny panel then reviews the evidence to support these assessments, and

then publishes its own assessment of performance, in the form of a report with recommendations for areas for improvement, whilst also highlighting areas of good performance. The report also includes a star rating for the quality of the estates and blocks of flats managed by the organisation. It is noted that the resident panel is supported by Achieving Customer Excellence inspectors in terms of reality checking the standards. An action plan is then developed to close the gap between actual and planned performance, and the panel monitors the action plan to ensure that the recommendations are being progressed.

Another example is offered by Wandle (2020) who use the Resident Scrutiny Panel to review services that are a priority for customers, including but not limited to resident complaints, the quality of repairs, and anti-social behaviour. The Panel also scrutinises the services delivered by the housing association, by reviewing the policies, strategies and service offers, as well as performance data and the legal and regulatory requirements of the provider. The scrutiny process also involves panel members speaking with housing association staff, observing work in progress and reviewing internal systems of day-to-day operations. The Panel then complete a report of their findings and recommendations for the housing provider, from which an action plan/service improvement plan is developed.

It is argued that the effectiveness of the process is dependent on all personnel having a degree of accountability, and ensuring that there is senior leadership ensuring that there are sufficient resources for the agreed measures to be carried out effectively (CIH nd., ; CIH 2014; Richardson et al., 2014).

It is also important to keep residents informed about the scrutiny process, and this can be achieved using a range of communication measured, including regular newsletters, and social media (Michael Guest Associates 2018).

## **5. How recommendations from Resident Scrutiny are *monitored for action***

A fundamental element to the success of Resident Scrutiny is ensuring that the issues highlighted by the panel are considered by the landlord's organisation in a transparent manner, with an action plan created to carry out the required improvements. There is also a need to monitor progress in terms of what is being actioned. This process requires strong leadership and a clear delineation of responsibility and accountability within the landlord's organisation (CIH 2014). It is argued that this process, which is monitoring actions is also crucial to the resident's confidence in the scrutiny process.

There are several ways in which recommendations from Resident Scrutiny can be monitored for action, including the use of monitoring and inspection teams, such as the Mystery Shopping Panel, a Residents' Quality Panel and a Customer Feedback Panel.

Each of these teams provide feedback for the housing association on performance against standards and targets (Swan Housing 2017).

For example the Mystery Shopping Panel should meet at least every quarter to carry out reality checks on the customer service being offered by the landlord organisation and the resident's experience of the services offered. This panel can check/review a wide range of services including Allocations and Lettings, Rent Teams, Resident Involvement and Estate Management as well as Asset Management. The findings from the mystery shopping exercise are then reported to the Resident Consultative Committee who identify the actions required, and these actions are then included in the landlords Service Improvement Plan. Residents can then be informed about the actions and the identified improvements in a newsletter (Swan Housing 2017).

Another method is to use Residents' Quality Panels which seeks to enhance the effectiveness of strategic partnerships such as those that the landlord has with repair and maintenance partners. This facilitates resident engagement and contribution with monitoring of existing services and the feedback can be used to influence future improvements in the delivery of these service. The actions can be monitored using an annual work programme with defined outputs, with progress monitored by carrying out inspections by telephone, along with visual checks on a predefined percentage of the repairs carried out each month (Swan Housing 2017).

It is argued that a customer feedback panel is also an essential element of effective monitoring of actions, where the panel comprises residents. It is suggested that the benefit of this type of panel is that it provides direct access to residents' views, as well as their experiences of services and opinions on those services. The data from the Panel can be collected using focus groups and steering groups, focusing on different aspects of the landlord organisation's business services including but not limited to Policies and Procedures; Allocations and Lettings and the way in which empty homes are managed. Other issues which can be included are Housing Equality and Diversity; Neighbourhood Services and Resident Involvement. The feedback from this Panel, can be communicated using whatever method is preferred by the residents such as e-mail, telephone and face to face with frontline staff. The feedback can be reviewed and an action plan developed and included in the Service Improvement Plan, with dates and allocation of responsibilities for actioning these measures (Swan Housing 2017; CIH 2014).

## **6. How outcomes from Resident Scrutiny are *communicated to the wider resident body***

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It is noted that the resident scrutiny process represents a sample of all residents and as such there is a risk that not all residents' views are taken into account. It is necessary therefore to communicate the outcomes of resident scrutiny with the wider resident body. This can be achieved in several ways either by taking direct action with respect to an issue, such as parking, or changing the way in which repairs are carried out as this provides evidence to tenants that the landlord organisation is listening and is responding to the concerns of the tenant body (CIH nd.,).

There are ways in which the landlord organisation can communicate with the wider resident body, for example by recruiting volunteer resident 'block champions' to communicate the outcomes of the scrutiny process and to keep a line of communication open between the landlord and the wider tenant body. The landlord organisation can also use social media, email and newsletters, to communicate efforts to the wider community (Pawson et al., 2012).

Examples of best practice are cited by Pawson et al., (2012) as providing regular feedback in newsletters, along with an annual publication of the results of tenant surveys covering a wide range of activities over the year, and highlighting both satisfaction trends and a resume of the suggestions for service improvement from residents (Pawson et al., 2012).

It is suggested that the effectiveness of the Resident Scrutiny process can be communicated to a wider audience using a range of measures such as through Resident Associations, and Young People's Forums, as well as fun days and Roadshows (Swan Housing 2017). As previously mentioned Resident Scrutiny requires a culture change with the resident-body and the landlord's organisation, as such it is argued that these measures encourage two-way communication between the residents and housing provider, as well as between tenants, thus enhancing the wider effectiveness of the scrutiny process.

## **7. How the work of Resident Scrutiny is *promoted across the wider resident body***

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The work of Resident Scrutiny can be promoted across the wider resident body by effective communication between frontline staff, senior management within the organisation and between residents. There are a range of media which can be used to promote this process including pointing out the benefits of the process through

newsletters, email communications and social media. It is also useful to promote the process during fun days, and at various forums held by the organisation such as the Youth Forum and ethnic minorities help and guidance groups. The key is to understand the residents, demographics such as age and ethnicity, as each may require different processes to promote and communicate with the resident body. For example if residents are mainly under 25 years, then the ideal way to promote the Resident Scrutiny programme is through digital media, such as Facebook and twitter. If however the demographic is over 60 years, then promotion may be through a newsletter, or using volunteers within a housing block to explain the process and connect with the residents. In other words there is no predefined process that works for all residents, as such the method of promotion should be tailored to the residents' demographics. It is argued that promotion can be more effective if the communication is about the problems identified and the solutions implemented for residents. Such communication would encourage support for the scrutiny process, and make also be an effective way of increasing resident participation in the process. The landlord organisation could further promote participation by providing training and education for the volunteers involved in the process, including away days and travel expenses for participants (CIH nd., ; CIH 2014).

#### **8. How *Value for Money* of Resident Scrutiny is determined and outcomes from this**

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Housing Associations and social housing landlords provide an invaluable service for contemporary society, and as indicated in the above discourse, the implementation of the Resident Scrutiny process is an effective way of improving the quality of services offered to residents. However it is also imperative that the landlord organisation raises sufficient funds to manage, repair and maintain properties and to provide the necessary resources to support quality of services within the organisation. As such the Resident Scrutiny process, along with all other actions within the landlord organisation must represent value for money (CIH 2014; Richardson et al., 2014).

Value for money has to be determined by considering the costs of the implementation of Resident Scrutiny, including the additional resources needed in terms of frontline workers, and additional training, against the cost savings from the implementation of the action plans developed as part of this process. If the financial value of the benefits outweigh the costs then the process offers value for the organisation. It is acknowledged that there are certain elements such as the social value of the measures which are difficult to quantify financially, however it is still important to include such as costs to provide a realistic review of the scrutiny process (Manzi et al., nd., Trotter et al., 2014).



There are studies such as those carried out by Manzi et al., (nd.), which indicate that the benefits of engagement through resident scrutiny outweigh the costs of the process. For example improvements to the procurement and complaints processes and customer experience have led to resource savings estimated at £2.7m p.a., attributable in large part to resident involvement in co-regulation, where the cost of the process was estimated at £950,000. An example of such savings and the value of the Resident Scrutiny process is AmicusHorizon which scored the highest levels of satisfaction of any large social landlord in the United Kingdom with an average of 97% overall satisfaction with services, attributed to listening to and actioning issues highlighted by resident input.

This Group also recognise the important role of cultural change within the provider's organisation, noting the need for and commitment to constant feedback from residents input, thus allowing the organisation to provide value for money by providing the exact services required by the resident body (Manzi et al., nd.). An example of the savings achieved through this process includes £181,000 per annum derived from changes to the resident's complaints process. The scrutiny process suggested changes such as the development of a solution-focused approach emphasising where possible addressing complaints at the first contact. Other suggestions that were also actioned included the creation of a central Customer Experience Team which led to greater consistency in managing complaints and higher levels of ownership. The residents also highlighted the need for greater transparency and collaboration with respect to complaints, which resulted in the creation of resident representatives chairing Stage 3 panels relating to the complaints process (Manzi et al., nd.). The point being that it is more cost effective and hence of greater value for residents and providers to work as a collaborative unit, as this makes actioning the highlighted issues less complex and easier to share knowledge and communicate outcomes.

## **9. What Social Value has been achieved through Resident Scrutiny**

It is argued that good quality housing and services within social housing has a profound impact on the quality of life for residents. Effective housing services can influence a myriad social problems from health and well-being to social inclusiveness and isolation. Housing services connect with other essential services such as health and social services. In other words, effective housing adds social value beyond that confines of housing, making it easier for residents to access other services (Richardson et al., 2014).

As previously mentioned it is difficult to measure the social value of resident scrutiny processes, however based on research conducted by the CIH (2014) the social

benefits of improved tenant scrutiny include increased levels of customer satisfaction, improved training and qualifications for staff working with tenants, and improved skills of the tenants working on scrutiny panels, which has increased confidence and employment prospects.

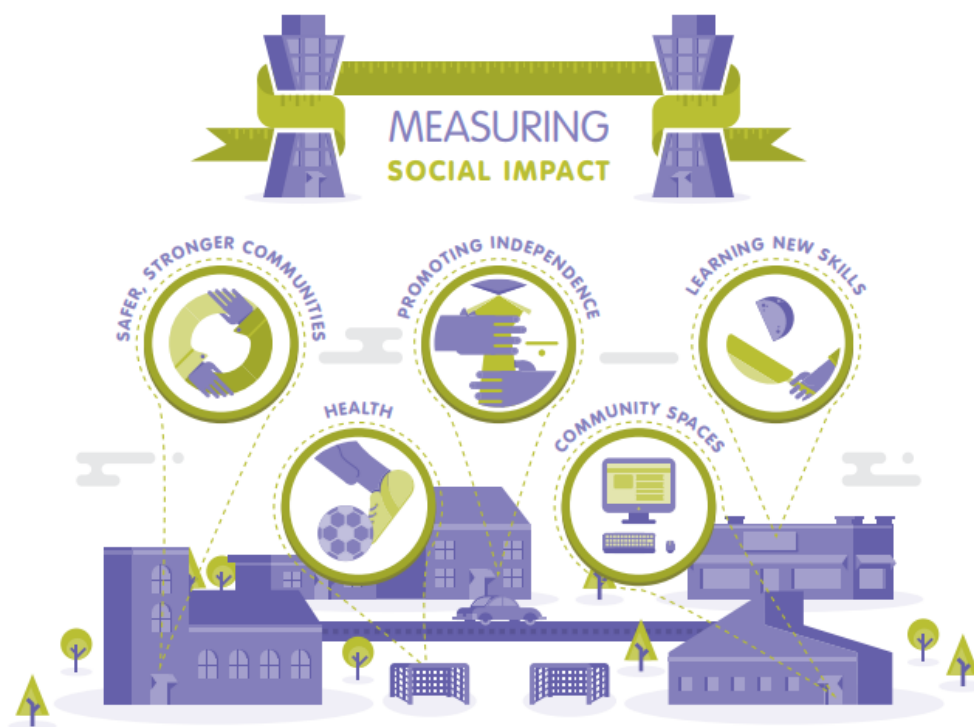


Figure 1. Measuring Social Impact (Trotter et al., 2014, p.9, Figure 1).

As shown in the above figure, Trotter et al (2014) maintain that social impacts can be measured by assessing safety, independence and the acquisition of new skills, as well as health and the quality of community spaces. Social value can also be divided into activity values and outcome values. In this context, activity values include value that is gained by the person undertaking an activity. For instance, participation in the scrutiny process may add value to the volunteers. In contrast, outcome values are value linked with change. For example a resident who feels safer may be encouraged to increase their social interaction with other residents with knock on health benefits, or a resident may develop new skills by participating in the scrutiny process. In fact Trotter et al., (2014) sought to monetarise the social value of participating in a tenant group, and concluded that the value of the social benefits derived from such participation were approximately £8,116, whereas feeling a sense of belonging to a neighbourhood, could be valued at £3,753. The point being that there is social value associated with an inclusive and collaborative housing environment.

Referring once more to the case of AmicusHorizon where the resident scrutiny process has resulted in, as mentioned considerable financial savings, it is argued that a detailed cost-benefit also captures the wider social benefits of the process. These include increase confidence and satisfaction amongst residents who now play a central role in improved services. The collaborative and inclusive approach to residents has also generated greater trust within the community, and reduced conflict between frontline and residents. The scrutinisation process supports better decision making, thus reducing waste and the risk of failure. From the organisation's perspective, increased resident satisfaction has improved the reputation of the organisation, which in turn given the Regulator of Social Housing greater confidence in the organisation's governance arrangements (Manzi et al., nd.).

#### **10. The *features of best practice* in Resident Scrutiny now and going forward under modern circumstances – e.g. use of communications technology, other**

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Best practice in Resident Scrutiny should focus on three principles (CIH nd.) namely;

- Independence – whereby scrutiny activities must be independent of governance and management as well as mainstream tenant participation structures. At the same time, scrutiny must have a formal recognised status within the operations of the organisation with commitment from all those in the organisation from the outset.
- Formality – it is essential that there are clearly defined roles and responsibilities in terms scrutiny activities. This can only be achieved if there are clear terms of reference and defined lines of reporting within the organisation, along with clear levels of accountability.
- Power – the entire scrutiny is founded on the need to empower tenants/customers and to enable landlords to continually improve the value and quality of the services supplied. Therefore it is essential that customers involved in scrutiny activities have access to data which facilitates an examination of services and standards, and that the process is in place to enable these customers to make recommendations for service improvements. Scrutiny is a two-way process, and such it should include mechanisms for landlords to respond to these recommendations by discussing and agreeing which measures can be implemented, and when necessary a process to explain why recommended measures cannot be implemented.

It is evident that the key to successful tenant scrutiny is effective, open communication. This can be enhanced by using panels relating to different elements of the housing

association performance, which feed into the scrutiny group. In recognition of the potential complexity of such a communication system it is argued that digital technology can improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the process. Such technology can include social media, live Question & Answer sessions on Twitter chat to promote the scrutiny process and participation, and using Facebook to keep tenants informed of the landlords progress/actions. In the interests of equality and ensuring an inclusive environment, other forms of communication include using text and email to capture feedback (Michael Guest Associates 2018).

Examples of good practice suggest that the key to participation is to have a diverse range of measures that increase social interaction between landlord and tenants, and between tenants, focusing on empowering residents to influence change within the landlord organisation's services and also at a local neighbourhood level within their properties. It is submitted that useful measures include estate inspections by resident, and neighbourhood agreements, where the former is useful in monitoring the performance of service provider and a means of identifying communal repairs and monitoring progress and the latter involves residents working with local frontline workers to agree plans and commitments targeting neighbourhood issues (Swan Housing 2017).

Residents' Groups and Associations should also be encouraged, as a means of understanding the problems within the service being offered and identifying the services that are working well. Focus Groups are another useful source of information and feedback on performance, whilst a Young People's Forum is essential in gathering views of a representative sample of residents in social housing. Other useful measures include residents' surgeries to manage specific issues which can relate to ethnicity, and Fun days which can be useful in developing a socially cohesive environment for both provider and tenant. The point of all of these measures is to increase resident engagement with the housing provider's staff, which in turn increases communication between these parties, enabling frontline staff to understand the problems and concerns of the residents, and thus facilitating change and improvements in the services offered. These processes are also useful for those residents on the Scrutiny Panel as it provides greater access to a wider range of residents (Swan Housing 2017; CIH 2014). The feedback and outcomes from these activities can be reported to management within the landlords' organisation for updating the Service Improvement Plan and shared with the wider resident body using the organisation's website, social media and newsletter (Swan Housing 2017).

## 11. Conclusion

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This Good Practice paper has sought to provide advice on how nine elements of the Scrutiny Health may be informed by the work of good practice bodies, researchers, Housing Providers and Resident Scrutiny Groups. It is intended to enable a wider consideration of the context of Scrutiny.

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