

Keeping tenants informed



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With the establishment of the Tenant Services Authority and a commitment to putting tenants' priorities at the heart of a new regulatory regime, social landlords will increasingly be expected to demonstrate a more 'customer-focused' approach to their operations. Much of our own customer satisfaction research demonstrates the importance of communications to overall satisfaction levels (see our e-bulletin article *What can we learn about communicating with our citizens?*) and so it is of some concern that analysis of our recent tenant satisfaction survey work in London suggests tenants feel less well informed than they did before.

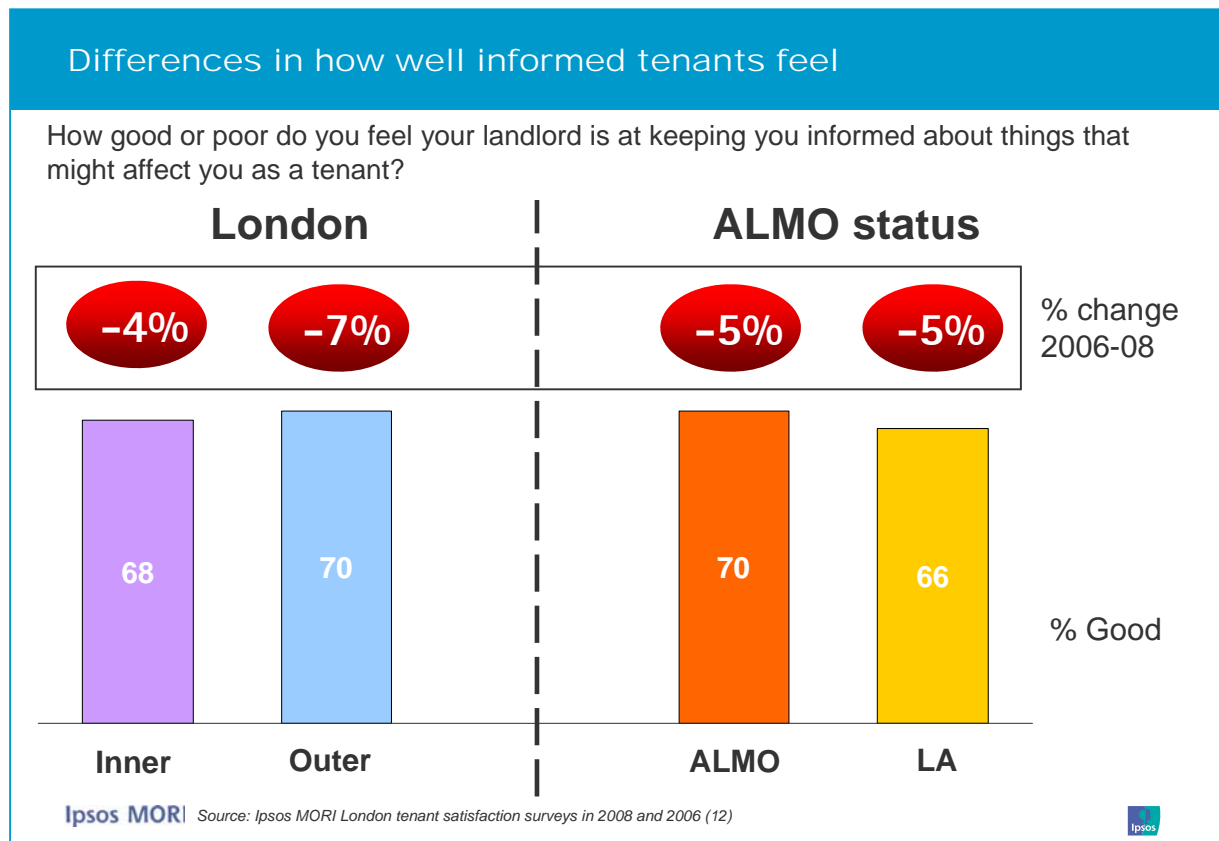
Although all English local authority and Arms Length Management Organisation (ALMO) landlords collect this information¹ as part of national performance assessment requirements (previously BVPIs and currently National Indicators), no national data is published on this topic. We do, however, have a strong indication of what is going on in London over the last two survey waves, having conducted tenant satisfaction surveys for around a half of all landlords in the capital.

Between 2006 and 2008² tenant satisfaction surveys run by Ipsos MORI across London show that those who are positive about the way their landlord keeps them informed has dropped by four percentage points overall.

A look in more detail at the data (see following chart) highlights some notable variations both by location and landlord type. Whilst those living in outer London and who rent from an ALMO feel better informed, both have seen their ratings fall at the same time. ALMO and local authority landlords have seen ratings decline uniformly over the last two years (a drop of five percentage points), but it is tenants living in outer London that show the **biggest** drop.

¹ Through the conduct of the standardised tenant satisfaction (STATUS) survey

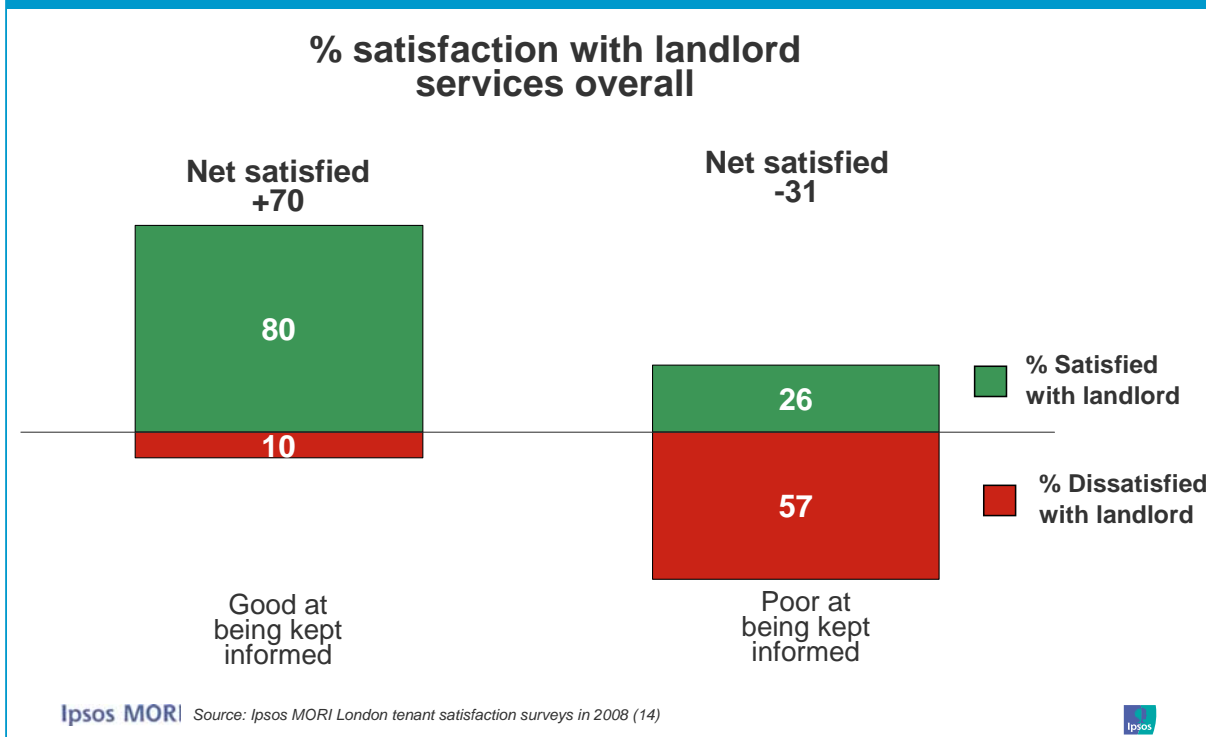
² Ipsos MORI tenant satisfaction surveys conducted as part of the BVPI and replacement National Indicator Surveys



Is this trend something that landlords should be concerned about? On the face of it, perhaps not; tenants are far more positive about being kept informed than the public generally. Recent Place Survey results show, for example, that just 37% of London residents feel well informed about local public services. Furthermore, when asked directly, tenants are far more likely to rate their repairs service and the quality of their home above being kept informed as important service priorities.

Closer examination of responses does, however, suggest an underlying importance, with those who feel informed three times as likely to be satisfied with their landlord overall as those who feel poorly informed.

The importance of keeping tenants informed for overall satisfaction



Follow-up discussions by Ipsos MORI with a range of tenants in London has highlighted the creation of separate management organisations as a significant factor in changing perceptions. The wealth of communications surrounding the creation of ALMOs, and the levering in of additional funds for Decent Homes in particular, is seen to have dramatically raised expectations around repairs to property.

“I’ve got problems with subsidence, a leaking roof and a multitude of problems inside. The transfer was supposed to change all that but it hasn’t... that’s why I’m getting sick of it, to be honest.”
ALMO tenant

A lack of clarity over roles and responsibilities has added further to the confusion.

“The communication stinks, I’m constantly being pushed from pillar to post, so it’s like oh, this is not the right department, I’ll put you through to somebody else. No, sorry, they’ve put you through to the wrong department...”
ALMO tenant

The clear message coming from tenants is that landlords will need to work harder to ensure their communications provide the right information in the right amount and in the right format. E-mail and text messaging are increasingly preferred by younger tenants, whereas some Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) tenant groups continue to stress the importance of face-to-face communication in their dialects. Development of mechanisms to cascade information as well as the flexibility to respond to tenant queries on specific communications are also considered important. This is supported by the research described by Sarah Castell in her article about Timely Information.

It is those landlords who are able to develop tailored and more sophisticated communication strategies who will be best placed to maintain and improve on key performance measures in coming years.

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