“We are announcing your target”: Reflections on performative language in the making of English housing policy

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Introduction

This paper looks at the relationship between the British Government and English (public sector) housing organisations. It argues that government policy makers and housing organisations have created a mutual feedback loop using performative language to co-create and to refine new policy ideas, even as they are being implemented. For housing organisations this may be part of their attempt to fit their environment, for government a way of demonstrating that policies are being delivered almost before they have been defined.

Public sector organisations have typically sought funding on the assumption that it is distributed on the basis of a blend of empirically demonstrated need and political influence. Under the current government, the author argues that a further layer has been added – the ability of organisations to demonstrate their support for the current government’s current projects – before those projects have really been defined. The paper argues that the definitions arise (and change) through the attempts of organisations to make their meanings into those which can bring the greatest reward. It further suggests that this discourse of policy definition, of meaning creation, may have become a form of activity for organisations – a way of demonstrating support for the government and its proposals for change, without fundamentally disturbing the working of the organisation.

These ideas have been tested through analysis of a selection of Housing Investment Programme (HIP) submissions. These are essentially annual applications for funding made by English local housing authorities to the government, on a prescribed form. HIP is only one part of an increasingly complex regulatory regime for English local housing authorities, but a most interesting one for discourse analysis because of its standard questions. The paper will argue that the words used by local authorities on their application forms are not straightforward signifiers of actual events (whether in the past or proposed for the future), but have more, and more complex, meanings, on a number of different levels. It suggests that the use of language may be an indicator of “success” in the bidding process.
For example, the word ‘regeneration’ can signify a set of activities for which the user is hoping to gain funding. But whilst the same set of activities could be called by different names (for example area renewal) – ‘regeneration’ is the current word, signifying support for the current projects of the current government. The activities in which the housing organisation is involved (whatever they are in practice) have become ‘regeneration’, through reiteration of the word over time, and through reiteration of the word, organisations are making an attempt to own the projects and activities it signifies. One housing organisation has even renamed itself as a ‘regeneration agency’ – yet the vast majority of its work remains the provision and management of housing for poor people. Thus the paper makes the tentative suggestion that it may not be policy or practice which changes, but language.

The paper concentrates on a particular type of language: the speech act - words which do as well as describe. Speech acts are common in everyday discourse, but they can be especially useful to policy makers in the media age. Governments are required to act quickly, to respond to opinion polls, media questions and ‘public opinion’ with instant solutions to a variety of problems. The current government makes use of speech acts, often in the form of the announcement of targets or future spending, to respond to public and media pressure. Inevitably it will be announcing things it has not fully developed. The paper argues that the necessary development then takes place between policy makers and other organisations, and that again, performative language is used in the policy creation process. This is the feedback loop between government and organisation, and it seems that those housing organisations which engage effectively in the loop are the most successful in terms of their funding.

The paper begins by explaining the context of the current ‘New Labour’ government in Britain and its role in regulating and funding public sector housing organisations, including the ones sampled for this research. It then looks at the use of performative language in general, and by the current government. The paper then considers whether and how the selected housing organisations used performative language in their HIP submissions.

**New Labour and modernising local government**

"...councils need to break free from old fashioned practices and attitudes ... There is no future in the old model of councils trying to plan and run most services ... our modernising agenda is seeking nothing less than a radical refocusing of councils’ traditional roles“ (DETR, 1998:1-2).

The ‘New Labour’ government was elected in 1997 on a platform of improving and ‘modernising’ the public sector, including ambitious plans for the health services, education and local government. The public sector in England houses around 20% of the population, and is provided by local authorities and by publicly funded, but
technically voluntary housing associations. This paper concentrates on local authority (or council) housing, but also refers to housing associations.

The Government's modernisation project is aimed at a general increase in the quality of public services. To improve, the Government says, service providers should focus on ‘what works’ rather than on the traditional needs of the establishment. Central to the modernisation programme are:

- increased central regulation backed up with thorough, independent and transparent inspections to ensure that service providers can't ignore the changes;
- an emphasis on customer consultation, involvement and participation;
- some increased resources and
- the demand that service providers meet centrally set targets, often through partnership with private or voluntary sector organisations.

The clearest example of this programme in operation for housing organisations is the programme of large scale voluntary transfer (LSVT) of homes from local authorities to housing associations. The Government requires all housing organisations to meet the 'Decent Homes Standard' by 2010. For most local authorities this will need massive investment in fairly run-down housing stock, and the Government refuses to increase public sector borrowing to finance housing investment. In order to raise the money from the private sector, councils have to transfer their stock to a housing association, which is able to raise private finance, or to set up an ‘arms’ length' management company, which again can borrow privately. Arms' length companies are most council’s first choice but are only open to those scoring well in inspections (the best managers), all others must transfer their stock. To proceed to either a transfer or an arms' length company, the council must win the support of a majority of its tenants for the proposal. In addition, the inspectors (who include tenant inspectors) inspect not only the council’s management of its housing stock, but also the arrangements for involving tenants. Councils who attempt to ignore the programme risk the Government taking over their management directly. To survive, local authorities have to engage with the Government’s agenda.

A second example of the Government’s approach is Best Value, which provides the discourse analysed for this paper. Best Value requires that local authorities (and many housing associations have adopted the principles) review their services “...and improve them by the best means available. This must be done in consultation with the people who use the services and the wider local community” (ODPM, undated). In carrying out their reviews, authorities have to:

- **Challenge**: why, how and by whom the service is being provided
- **Compare**: how well they are doing in comparison with other organisations
- **Consult**: with people who use the service to see what they think of it and how it could be improved
- **Compete**: consider whether using a competitive process would result in improvements

In addition to involving tenants in the processes described above, authorities are also obliged to publish their ‘performance plans’ (essentially reports of performance against targets, plus new targets) as widely as possible and to invite comments. Finally, the processes of Best Value are monitored and regulated by the Housing Inspectorate (as well as directly via the HIP returns), with the Government reserving the right to intervene if service delivery is poor and improvements are not made. Best Value uses the same modernising principles as the LSVT programme.

HIP is the annual ‘return’ made to central government by local authorities and includes a large section asking about Best Value and a further section on tenant participation policies and practices. A substantial proportion of the discretionary element of the funds allocated through the HIP process are given to authorities demonstrating excellence in tenant participation. These are the sections of the forms analysed in detail for this paper.

The policies and practices outlined so far have developed over time – the transfer programme was begun by the previous conservative government (although Labour has accelerated it) and Best Value was announced prior to the 1997 election. Housing organisations implementing these policies are following a ‘stimulus-response’ pattern. Although the policies are new, and demanding, housing organisations have generally had time to respond, and a fairly clear idea about what is expected of them. However there are aspects which are less clear, where the Government’s policies are less prescriptive, and where both the issues themselves and the plans for implementation have not yet been thought out. An example is the Tenant Participation Compact, part of Best Value.

Tenant Participation Compacts are a ‘framework’ for involving local authority tenants in housing management. The Government published guidance saying what the Compacts could cover, and when they should be implemented together with a good practice guide (DETR 1999a & b). But nothing like this had ever been done before, there was no obvious method of measurement and there was no single model which could be followed. So local authorities were largely on their own – knowing that they would be judged on their implementation of the Compact, but with no real way of knowing how to implement it. The Government was equally unsure about what the finished Compacts would be like – but it had promised that tenants would be more involved in the management of their homes:
“The framework is not prescriptive. It is designed to be flexible and comprehensive. It encourages local and innovative approaches to tenant participation, and it allows for the widely differing circumstances and starting points of councils and tenants across the country.

“All council landlords will be expected to agree and sign formal agreements compacts with their tenants on how tenants are involved in local decisions relating to their homes” (DETR 1999a).

Both Best Value and the Tenant Participation Compact are examples of policies which were needed to be developed even as they were being implemented. Because of the increased (and increasing) amount of inspection and regulation, and the potential for extra resources, local authorities were keen to implement the new policies – but more importantly to show that they were implementing them. Authorities which could show they were engaged with the new ideas would thrive, but thoroughgoing engagement could be costly, and would certainly demand some cultural change. Using language in a new way, and particularly using performative language may allow housing organisations to show they are ‘on side’ whilst giving them time to make changes and allow the policies to become clearer. Finally, using language in this way may also allow organisations to influence the policies themselves – by appearing to implement the policies early and effectively, organisations could ensure that their version was adopted elsewhere. This is the beginning of the feedback loop between housing organisations and an important part of their environment.

The use of performative language

Performative language can be defined as language which does, rather than describes. It is also called a ‘speech act’. An example would be to say “I promise…” or “I bet…” – in making the statement, the speaker is making the promise or the bet (Culler, J, 1997, Fromkin & Rodman, 1998). Performative language brings into being the words it uses. It is always in the present tense, the first person and is affirmative and declarative.

“Speech act theory is the study of what an utterance does beyond just saying something. The effect of what is done is called the illocutionary effect of the utterance. For example the use of a performative verb like ‘bequeath’ may be an act of bequeathing, which may have legal status” Fromkin & Rodman, 1998, 203)

Fromkin and Rodman (1998) suggest that inserting the word ‘hereby’ between the pronoun and the verb can enable the listener to decide whether the utterance is a speech act:

“I (hereby) name this ship … “ is a speech act but

“I (hereby) dash this bottle of champagne against the side” is a description of what I am doing.

There are also some areas of confusion – verbs which sound performative but may not have much illocutionary effect for example “we are tackling problems…” or “we are addressing the issue…”. The situational context is all important, so that “we are legislating to…” may be performative in the opening of a
parliamentary speech, but not in a television interview. However the words are the same in each situation, which may be one of the most useful properties of this form of language within the relationship between policy makers and organisations. Both can use language which sounds as if it has illocutionary force – or as if something is being done.

The Government appears adept at using a performative statement to give immediacy to an undeveloped policy without immediate funds or a firm timetable, for example:

- [We are] **putting in place** the powers and the framework (on anti-social behaviour 2003, Yvette Cooper, ODPM website)
- [I am] **launching** the Neighbourhood Renewal Unit which will produce an action plan later this year (2001 John Prescott, ODPM website)
- [I am] **announcing** that the programme of neighbourhood wardens will be tripled, for which £50 million will be made available and which will cover 250,000 households (2001, Tony Blair, Cabinet Office website)
- [I am] **telling you today** that legislation will be introduced to create (an initiative) that will be similar to a successful US example (2001, Tony Blair Cabinet Office website)

Although it would be wrong to suggest that any of these things will not (or did not) happen, or that it is unreasonable of a government to advertise its policies in advance, the speech act, or pseudo speech act at the start of each phrase makes it appear that something is being done now. In each of these cases the phrases reproduced here were preceded with a discussion of a problem – with the performative phrase then produced as a solution. This may be one aspect of what McLuhan (1989, quoted in Slayden & Whillock, 1998) describes as “...a death of linear thinking, planning and policy implementation...[in favour of] an all-at-onceness”. Whillock (1998) says that such immediate responses are part of a decline in the kind of political discourse which is able to take a long term, linear approach. Instead, it may be that the policy is announced as if it were a finished product, and then it is created, or co-created together with the implementers.

Judith Butler showed how this could work in defining and creating gender and sexuality, through reiteration. Reiterating key performative language creates new meanings, so that the word ‘queer’ changes from a description into an insult and a threat, including the full range of cultural homophobia. (Butler, J, 1993) Derrida describes performative interpretation as interpretation “which transforms the very thing it describes” (Derrida, 1994, p51). So performative language is language with associations with repeating and transforming as well as with doing. All are essential for the creation of policy in a feedback loop.
In his essay ‘Negotiable Realities’ (1999), David Slayden discusses hyperreality in similar terms, saying that a workable (but essentially false) definition of reality can be created using a non-linear loop, “more focussed on feedback than causality” (p231). The definition is given validity by repetition. The boundaries between the policy makers (the environment) and the implementers (the organisation) have become blurred. Feedback can be used to check that communications have been received and understood, and also to establish rapport through mirroring. Neuro-linguistic programmers use ‘gesture mirroring’ for this purpose – to signal “I'm like you”. The opposite is to fail to pick up the signal and send it back, which it is argued is what some housing organisations have done, to their detriment.

The use of modernisation language can work in the same way. Through using the language, the modern public sector is brought into being, and through reiteration and re-interpretation it gains new meanings. Unlike a policy like Right to Buy (which was a set of clear instructions), the modernisation process was named largely before it was defined. Defining what it might mean is an ongoing process involving both the makers of the policy, and those organisations upon whom it is to be imposed, and this paper will argue the definitions include performative declarations that it is happening already.

The Government uses performative language in its own documents, press releases and speeches. Phrases like “we are tackling problems in housing by … announcing our proposals for …” are common (DETR, 2000). “Tackling problems” and “Announcing proposals” both sound like acts of doing, only the situational context can tell us whether anything is being done. The announcement is an act, although at the point it is made, nothing concrete has actually been done – it is a cost-less act. The proposals which are being announced are also (at the point of the announcement) cost-less – they are simply proposals, and the audience is almost always invited to contribute to making them a reality. The current government are doing something and reaching for definition in the same phrase. At the same time, the current government’s use of performative language (especially the announcement of targets) brings to the present moment something which may (or may not) happen in the future. The high scoring local housing authorities in our sample joined the government in a performative dialogue.

The part of the funding regime we are concerned with here (HIP), requires councils to answer a series of questions about their activities. Although there are some checks of the accuracy of the information provided, the HIP form itself is used by government officers as a large part of the process of allocating funds to authorities. Funds may therefore be contingent on the use of language in answering questions about the authorities’ activity. The HIP forms act as a medium for the local authority to advertise itself to the Government. Yin warns of the danger of assuming documents contain “literal recordings of events which have
taken place” (Yin 1993:81), rather they reflect communications designed to achieve a particular purpose, and should be read in that light.

The words used by local authorities are not straightforward signifiers of actual events (whether in the past or proposed for the future), but have more complex, meanings, on a number of different levels. Wittgenstein referred to 'language-games', where the meaning of an expression is dependent on the language-game in which it occurs. Ideology is transmitted first and foremost through language. Words don’t just represent things, they are actions in themselves. To speak is to act. (cited in Thompson, 1981: 18-19).

The same words or messages have different significance to different groups, or in different contexts. There is no single inherent meaning within a document, its meaning depends on who is reading it, in what circumstances. Writing about advertisements, Gillian Dyer says:

"... the meaning of an advertisement is not something there, statically inside ... waiting to be revealed by a 'correct' interpretation. What an ad means depends on how it operates, how signs and its 'ideological' effect are organised internall (within the text) and externally (in relation to its production, circulation, consumption, and in relation to its technological, economic, legal and social relations)" (Dyer, 1982:115).

The language of modernisation is used by councils as a form of advertising. In the same way that commercial advertisers use lifestyle images to sell their product, councils seek to project themselves to funders as modern. By using the language of modernisation, councils can signal that they have adopted the Government's programme, and by using performative language, they can show that they are already operating the Government's favoured systems.

Housing organisations have recast government in the role of the customer, and are busy selling themselves. The people they often refer to as customers (tenants and applicants for housing) may in fact be less important to the long term survival of the organisation. The paper now goes on to compare two sets of local housing authorities in terms of their measurable performance indicators and their use of language. These are two ways in which housing organisations sell themselves to the funder.
Comparison 1: high and low performers in the housing management task

The research for this paper was part of a much bigger tenant participation project funded by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (Millward, Beckford, Dougal & Reid, 2003), which looked in detail at a sample of local authorities. The researchers compared what the local authorities said they were doing to encourage tenant participation in their HIP forms with what organised groups of tenants said the authority was doing. One example of this wider comparison is presented here, but the central focus of the paper is on the HIP forms themselves, and the language they use. In order to be able to do a detailed discourse analysis the sample was restricted to 16 of the larger group. These were 8 of the highest performers and 8 of the lowest performers (as ranked by the then DTLR and by Appleton et al, 1999). We compared their performance indicators (self-reported), then looked at their use of language. Although the funding and regulatory regime for housing organisations is currently changing, part of the funding process is dependent on a good ‘score’ on a number of performance indicators.

The authorities chosen for this sample were selected from the top and bottom performers from two separate analyses - one from the DETR and one from Appleton et al for the DETR, and were also part of the bigger sample with which the researchers were already familiar. A balance of urban/rural and different regions was sought.

There were more high performers than low performers in the population as a whole, and these proportions can be found in a number of other studies of performance in housing organisations – for example by the Audit Commission. The spread, based on the DETR categories is shown below, (the Appleton et al categories show a similar pattern). It is worth noting that some of these ‘below average’ authorities are small rural ones, and that there were very few of these types of authorities in the above average gradings. However, most of the authorities in the study were ‘medium’ sized, with 10 of the 16 authorities chosen having less than 10,000 properties (see appendix).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Well above average</th>
<th>Above average</th>
<th>Average</th>
<th>Below average</th>
<th>Well below average</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>28</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>191</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The performance indicators (PIs) which have been chosen are those which have been used for longest in housing management. Performance Indicator tables are included as figures 1 – 4 below. The number of each authorities falling into each band is shown in the tables. Tables 1, 2 and 4 show how efficient the authority is at financially – collecting rents and ensuring that properties are not sitting empty (meaning rent is not payable). Table 3 shows how efficient the authority is in one aspect of housing management – repairing properties.
quickly. The ‘emergency’ repairs category usually includes things like serious water leaks, electrical and other faults which could endanger life, blocked drains and so on.

Table 1: Rent collection (the proportion of rent collected out of the total possible rent)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>High scoring authorities</th>
<th>Low scoring authorities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>100% +</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>98-100%</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>96-98%</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>no answer</td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Cumulative rent arrears (as a proportion of the total possible rent)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>High scoring authorities</th>
<th>Low scoring authorities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>less than 2%</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3-4%</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4-5%</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5-6%</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6-7%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7-8%</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>more than 8%</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>no answer</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3: Percentage of emergency repairs completed within target (all one day or less)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>High scoring authorities</th>
<th>Low scoring authorities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>100%</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>95-100%</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>90-95%</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>85-90%</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>no answer</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4: Number of days taken to re-let “non-management vacants” (homes which are empty because the tenants have left and which could be relet immediately. A “management vacant” is a property which is empty but which cannot be relet for a variety of reasons.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>High scoring authorities</th>
<th>Low scoring authorities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>up to 10</td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10-20</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20-30</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30-40</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40-50</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>over 50</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>no answer</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Remarkably, there was little significant difference in the main performance indicators between the low and high scoring authorities. The one noticeable difference in this area is that four of the low-scoring authorities give no answer to one or more of the performance indicator questions. By contrast, when we compared the use of
language in the two samples, the differences were both significant and noticeable throughout as will be seen below.

In an analysis like this one, the most easily quantifiable PIs are also the easiest to compare, which may have a distorting effect. Some commentators have suggested that their use in the business of measuring competence has shifted the nature of the housing management task towards things which can be quantified – essentially from ‘welfare’ to ‘bricks and mortar’ (see for example Jacobs and Manzi, 2000, Walker, 2000). Nonetheless, these indicators have been used for many years, suggesting that organisations have had time to respond to the requirement to measure and quantify some parts of the management task. Whatever else a housing organisation could or should do, collecting rent and doing repairs are fundamental. To do either badly risks the future of the organisation. However, the use of PIs as part of the ‘modern’ funding regime is also part of the shift from having to demonstrate need to having to demonstrate competence.

Neither best value nor tenant participation have such longstanding or easily measurable PIs, which is one reason why the regulatory regime has become so complex. As part of HIP, best value and tenant participation are measured with some numbers and a lot of open questions about what is done. The number-questions are not comparable to the fundamental housing management indicators above for two main reasons. Firstly they ask for things like the number of tenants’ groups the authority has, which is fairly meaningless as it may depend on a whole range of factors outside the authority’s control. An authority with two groups may in fact be a much better performer than one with 20. Secondly, in an attempt to address this problem, the questions have been changed each year, unlike the PIs above which have been used for at least a decade. So the words are much more important than the numbers.

**Comparison 2: high and low performers in the use of language**

The researchers looked at a number of key Government texts including *Modern Local Government in touch with the people*, the *National Framework for Tenant Participation Compacts* and the *Framework for Best Value in Housing*, focussing on key words and phrases which we were looking to see ‘mirrored’ by housing organisations. These form the basis of our results, below.

We started by selecting a number of key words and phrases showing the “game being played” (Jacobs and Manzi, 1996, p551), from the government texts. Secondly, we analysed the forms in terms of the use of performative and the language used by organisations looking to sell their products to their customers. These included descriptions of structures and processes and re-naming services, the use of hyperbole and traditional/modern oppositions. Finally, we looked at whether there was any evidence to suggest that the
activities described on the forms represented any new housing services – in other words was it possible to tell whether the organisation had actually changed.

Key ‘mirroring’ words and phrases were found most frequently in the above average HIP forms. They include:

- affordable
- partnerships
- consistency
- efficiency
- choice
- sustainable
- flexibility
- empowerment
- customer
- condition
- strategic
- objective
- holistic
- small geographical areas with multiple problems
- integrated mixed tenure
- consultation
- benchmark
- involvement
- access
- community

Above average authorities
An immediate notable characteristic of all the ‘above average’ authorities is the sheer length and number of words that have been written in the HIP returns. A quick test for government evaluators short of time would be to weigh each of the forms!

The high scorers used a number of devices, common to them all which set them apart quite clearly from the low scorers. In addition, they write more coherently and professionally and use more euphemisms for ‘people’ than below average councils eg, resident, tenant, customer, citizen, consumers, local people. The key words above were all found far more often in the high scorers' forms.

The high scorers had almost all picked up on the use of the performative and the pseudo performative. There was a strong emphasis on description of structures and processes, and on naming and re-naming the activities being carried out, and the titles, schemes and organisations involved. There is noticeable mixing of tenses, which has the effect of making the reader unsure of whether the activity is planned, or completed.

- Authorities use the present tense to signify action for example: we are “currently conducting a major consultation of Private Sector Households in respect of the future development of the Housing Strategy”.
- Make statements where it is unclear if they have done, are doing, or plan to do what they are describing, such as: "consultation with private sector tenants and residents is central to the way in which the council tackles problems with anti-social behaviour”.
- Make performative statements and then build on them, so not only refer to something that does not yet exist, but go on to refer to the benefits that the non-existent scheme will have: [we are in the process of] “developing a high quality call-centre which will provide easy access to the majority of our housing services. It will also free up staff to be able to provide a more high profile role in the community, dealing
with environmental and community regeneration issues.” This is uncannily close to the way the Government announces new initiatives.

- Are quick to point out methods of consultation such as roadshows, focus groups, questionnaires, forums, focus groups and panels. Below average authorities tend to say they “consulted tenants”.

- Refer to specific job titles: [we have] “employed a Tenant Compact Development Worker”, “the re-designated post of Housing Policy Officer will be playing a key role in establishing particular structures”. In some answers, a list of job titles is synonymous with action having been taken, for example one way to fulfil the demand for partnerships is to employ a Partnership Officer. In the same way, the Government sets up a ‘Unit’. As with the lists of named initiatives (below), the list of named officers could fill several pages.

- High performing authorities are more likely to have a range of specially named schemes, complete with capital letters: “Chorlton Triangle Initiative, which complements the council’s Bright and Clean Initiative”, “Home Security Package”, “The Three Wishes exercise”, “Lighting Against Crime”, “Inter-function Officers Group”. Again a list of these named initiatives would fill several sheets of paper.

- Details of things tenants have asked for, as part of consultation exercises, with no indication of whether they were delivered.

- Give the name of every single government initiative, at every opportunity:

- Take credit for other organisations' work: "We are members of the Housing Quality Network which has over 150 LA and HA members and was set up to assist housing organisations achieve improvements in the performance, quality and value of housing services” Several authorities count as their own achievement schemes developed by local housing associations. “Support for...” developments from across the public and voluntary sectors is also counted as an achievement by the authority. In the same way Tony Blair says that his new initiative is similar to a successful US scheme.

- Make use of technical language, especially acronyms, eg TTAF  EHO, OT, DFG, HACCIT, GPU, CWOIL, HFTA. Some are initially written in full and others are not.

- Use empty phases that nobody really knows the meaning of (even though they are used by the government as well), eg "thematic", "area strategies are key to creating sustainable communities".

The high scorers mirrored the government's words, phrases and ways of using language. They also sell themselves, using not only hyperbole, but also indicating that the authority has rejected 'old' methods, in favour of 'new'.

- Hyperbole is used throughout the high scoring forms: great strides; dynamic and innovative; challenging; excellence in service provision; opportunity seized; tenants were eager..."In the current year there will be 14 trainees and it is expected that a minimum of 4 jobs will be accessed. This clearly demonstrates the Council's commitment to getting the best value possible from these welcome additional resources” (part of
which have paid for a new council post) “Through our holistic approach to regeneration the Long Lane estate has benefited from a capacity building centre, a rejuvenated tenants’ group and various percent for art schemes. As a result voids have reduced, suggesting this is a more desirable place to live.” “[our] PFI status illustrates [our] commitment to strengthening [our] strategic centre and separating management functions.”

• Overkill: authorities seem to be members of several different benchmarking/quality groups rather than just one (and each one is listed).
• Tend to repeat descriptions of schemes/outcomes/etc in different questions so as to make the impression that they are doing more.
• Use very new Labour, modern words and catch phrases and so signal support for new Labour; an authority comments that it no longer has departments (traditional), rather it has cross-cutting thematic directorates (modern). “Workshops with location based groups of tenants” is the modern equivalent of the traditional public meeting and “We are committed to contacting and listening to the views of the silent majority” as opposed to: “Large public meetings are not the preferred method of consultation and experience has shown that real participation is more likely in small informal groups.”

**Below average authorities**
Categorising the below average authorities in the same way comes up with startlingly different results. One authority in particular hardly answered any questions, others hand-wrote parts of the form. There are frequent misspellings and little evidence of proof-reading as these two examples of answers to a question about methods being used to improve accessibility to services for non-English speaker show: “Non-english speakers is not an issue”, “home visits are carried out”. Sometimes, they don’t answer the question - an answer to the question “is the policy published?” is “Yes. No”. These authorities also write much less than the high scorers.

There seems to be some attempt to describe structures and processes, but there are much shorter lists of job titles, and many responses simply say what has not been done. Replies use some of the key words from new Labour, but they are not used positively or performatively, giving the impression that they do not represent any real attempt to engage with modernisation, or perhaps that nothing is happening. Most things are due to happen sometime in the unspecified future.

• “No target is set because it is not an issue, but it is monitored regularly”.
• “...limited and mixed response, unable to measure”.
• “...some work has been carried out in this area - in the current year we expect to undertake some process benchmarking - we will be exploring the options to ... (best value)” “Corporate objectives are not yet available... Although the policies were used to develop specific policies the responses (to a satisfaction
survey) backed the Borough-wide joined up thinking which will apply to this year's survey - hopefully this should be ready...There are no examples of..." “We plan to...”

- There are far fewer named initiatives.

These authorities are not trying to sell themselves. There are no attempts to show modern, as opposed to traditional ways of working, and there are efforts to deny the modern issues exist for them – we don't need regeneration, we don't have difficult to let properties and so on. Where the high scorers take every blank space as an invitation to say more about their successes and their competence, the low scorers are content to say nothing.

- Instead of repeating successful sounding schemes in a number of questions as the high scorers do, low scorers cross reference thus : "see q (n)" leaving a large gap in the form.

- Write negative advertisements of their activities . eg “there are no tenant associations” and “the council does not have the type of problem estate that requires regeneration” (compare this to a high scoring authority where they also say that regeneration is not an issue, but goes on to add "...although tenants have been involved in area based consultation e.g. Neighbourhood Community Planning") or “The existing computer system does not lead to effective arrears recovery...”

- From joined up to mixed up: “There are no difficult to let properties in the Borough. However there have been increases in cases of frequent refusals of offers on a particular estate.”

There are far fewer examples given for the low scorers because they provided far fewer words. Of course this may have been because they had less to write about, and the high scorers were simply doing more. Part of our study involved trying to work out whether 'old' housing services were simply being renamed, or whether the lists of initiatives from the HIP forms referred to either genuinely new activities, or activities which involved new ways of working. Part of the problem was a difficulty in identifying exactly what housing services are being provided - there is far more information about how services are provided - even where outcomes are specifically asked for.

There were a number of examples of fairly routine housing services being re-packaged. These were services, which it would be reasonable to suppose a high scoring local authority would provide as a matter of course, such as visiting sheltered tenants every day, or providing entry-phones for inner city “flatted dwellings”, or introducing a cleaning service for empty properties, or even to hold regular rent arrears meetings with colleagues from housing benefits and legal departments. It seems fairly obvious that housing staff need to liaise with Occupational Therapists to provide adaptations for disabled people. But such is the hyperbole surrounding the presentation of this information, that, in context, these are presented as substantial
achievements. Some presentations verge on the ludicrous: “Protecting Vulnerable Tenants” turns out to be a scheme to repair and provide boundary fencing; “People & Places” a scheme with its own “Programme Manager” lists one of its main achievements as the provision of compost bins.

However, these examples compare well to the attempts of the below average authorities to put a ‘spin’ on housing services. One council said it used the provisions of the Right to Manage legislation to govern whether tenants could join tenants’ associations, another that they informed tenants of rent increases. The Right to Manage legislation has nothing to do with whether tenants can join associations, and authorities are obliged by law to tell tenants about rent increases.

So has the service changed? In the period since this piece of research was begun (1999-2000) it has been possible to see some clear changes in the amount of tenant participation opportunities being offered (and taken up). Although there is as yet no clear quantitative information about the increase in the number of tenants involved, there is plenty of anecdotal evidence that the numbers are rising. There is far less information about whether this involvement is having much effect. One case study may provide a (partial) answer.

The case of Northern City

In their HIP form return, Northern City Council appears to be busy consulting and working in partnership with its tenants. However, interestingly for this study Northern City Tenants’ Federation drafted their own response, revealing that although there is some consultation with tenants going on, it is not as extensive as the HIP return says. The Federation also disputes some of the claims about the outcomes of consultation referred to in the HIP form. This is a practical example that the language used in the HIP process clearly has meanings at a different level to that of signifying activity.

In the HIP return, Northern City Council refers to being “committed to encouraging consultation” and states that “consultation with a full range of partners and local residents has been fundamental in all areas to the development of our neighbourhood regeneration strategies including stock transfers”. The tenants response to this paints a different picture. From their point of view, rather than consultation about stock transfer, the authority announced its intentions to transfer its housing stock and have subsequently told the tenants that “you have no other alternative but to choose stock transfer”. Those who raise objections are labelled “agitators”.

In Section 4 of the HIP form: Tenant Participation in housing management, Northern City Council states that there are thirteen Local Tenant Forums which consist of “tenants association representatives, individual
tenants, leaseholders, owner-occupiers and RSL (housing association) residents." The Federations response is that this information is incorrect and the Authority were informed of this prior to the completion of the HIP form. Membership of the Tenant Forums is for council tenants only. Northern City goes on to discuss anti-social behaviour and states that there has been close consultation with tenant representatives and that there have been joint conferences and seminars. The Federation dispute this claim, reporting that there has been no close consultation, only one joint conference and since then the tenants have had no contact with the Anti-Social Behaviour Unit, despite continued efforts to contact them.

A final example of the mis-match between what a council says it is doing and what the tenants say it is doing, is in response to a question in the HIP form that asks the council to indicate how it is involving tenants in decision-making. Northern City Council reports that they inform tenants by producing newsletters and leaflets, that they consult tenants through interviewing and they involve tenants by having working groups, focus groups and joint visits. The Federation's response to this implies that they are unaware that these activities are going on and had 'never heard of them.

In particular the Federation objects to the way the Council uses the term 'consultation' to imply that it will respond to the outcome of that consultation. The Federation's comments seem to suggest that some consultation is carried out, but not acted upon, which presumably defeats the point of consultation. In effect, the council carries out this form of 'consultation' so it can say it has done it.

It is not fair to either party to say that one is telling the truth and the other lying. The Council is involved in something far more complex than describing things that aren't true. In part it is signalling to the Government that it, Northern City Council, is 'on side', that it has heard the Government's message and is reflecting it back, by using the same words and by using language in the same way. Secondly it is involved in a project of creating policy and implementing it at the same time. By using language performatively, the Council can talk about something it may do (once the definition has become clearer) and simultaneously appear to be doing it already. Included in such statements are some suggestions about what the activity may be like, if it were actually done – which the Council hope will then be reflected back to them in the feedback loop. The tenants, outside the loop, only know that it is not being done.

Conclusions
From such a small study, it is obviously not possible to judge whether the same 'old' housing service is being provided, wrapped up in shiny new packaging and nor is it clear whether successful councils are successful because they use the right language, or the reverse. The study did show that high scoring authorities used language in a way which has resonance with the new Labour project of modernising local government.
John Cole (1996) suggests that the current Government has consciously re-packaged itself as a way of getting closer to the electorate. Part of that re-packaging includes an engagement with the use of language. This has led to media accusations of government by announcement, and of announcing the same expenditure on more than one occasion.

Housing organisations depend in part for their survival on engaging successfully with the political process. An argument could be made that successful authorities under the last Government needed only to demonstrate a willingness to privatise the service and reduce its cost to the taxpayer. The current Government makes more complex demands. Authorities are required to re-think their services, without the help of hard and fast rules, but in a climate of ever greater emphasis on audit, control and outcomes. The current Government has produced a prodigious quantity of research, consultation documents and challenges, but very little in the way of concrete instructions. The tenant participation Compact for example, says that landlords should demonstrate that they fulfil a series of requirements, but does not give a template for doing so. One conclusion could be that the Government is not yet clear what ‘modern’ local government housing service will look like either.

Under these circumstances, it is perhaps not surprising that councils might seek to re-make their image and structures rather than make substantial changes to services – only to find that they have got it wrong. Another reasonable response is to become involved in the re-packaging “game” themselves, by trying to define the meaning of terms which remain nebulous – like sustainable – in ways which cause the least fundamental disturbance. At the very least, organisations may be buying time in which to consider whether to make fundamental changes, or they may be concealing their disagreement with the suggested change. Change is hard, and local housing authorities may be right to resist it – public sector organisations have traditionally sought the bureaucratic virtue of fairness, and may be worried that modern methods will undermine fairness, or accountability.

The boundaries between the organisation and its environment have become blurred, with policy makers and implementers involved in an endless loop of announcement and partial definition, reflection and further definition. Perhaps then, this is the process in which the successful authorities are engaged, through their use of performative language in the HIP submissions. Successful councils are simultaneously showing support for the Government which funds them, and defining the terms under which they should be judged.
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Appendix

Sample

The ‘above average’ authorities selected for analysis were a mixture of Metropolitan, Unitary, City, District and Borough councils: Bolton Metropolitan Council, Cambridge City Council, Chichester District Council, Derby Unitary Council, Eastbourne Borough Council, Manchester City Council, North Tyneside Metropolitan Council and Tamworth Borough Council.


Stock sizes

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Notes

i It is worth noting that this is changing – the Government is downgrading the HIP form and paying more attention to inspectors’ reports.

ii The sample for the research was 40 local authorities out of a total of approximately 300. The sample was designed to reflect a balance of regions, size, performance tenant participation history and urbanisation. A further 40 housing associations were also sampled, from a similar total population.