

**Summary Report of findings from the  
Housing Plus Academy Think Tank:  
*Rethinking Social Housing*  
17<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> April 2018, Trafford Hall**

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# Findings from Rethinking Social Housing Think Tank based on tenants' views during Think Tank sessions 17<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> April 2018 at Trafford Hall

The Housing Plus Academy, based at Trafford Hall, organised a Tenant Think Tank, supported by the Chartered Institute of Housing, on Rethinking Social Housing. The programme reflected both the priorities of both the Chartered Institute of Housing and the Housing Plus Academy. Sessions covered the following main areas:

- The Housing Crisis – how did we get here?
- What is the special role of social housing?
- What is the public image of social housing?
- How are social landlords changing?
- Why are tenants' voices crucial to rethinking social housing?
- How should neighbourhoods and estates be managed?

*"I love my tower block – lived there 34 years – brilliant flat"  
"Social housing will become a thing of the past unless we get heard"*

## 1. Tenants need to be heard

- **Respect is crucial for all forms of tenant involvement.** The TPAS registration for tenant involvement is a standard setter. Linked to this, it is important to have a **code of conduct** to ensure that involvement avoids needless confrontation. Training helps build community resilience. If tenants want things to change, **it is important to get the ear** of staff, local councillors, and MPs. Tenants need **training for their roles** as community representatives, to ensure positive communication with landlords and to build community resilience.
- Tenants have some power and **influence over what happens**. Landlords depend on support from tenants and tenants' rent "pays their wages".
- **Tenants' panels are being disbanded** in many organisations and areas and tenants are also **being removed from their positions on governing boards**. Many landlords now rely on digital communication and this makes it more difficult to participate as a community. We need to find positive ways for tenants to have a voice. It helps to involve the **younger generation** in articulating what is needed.
- Tenants need a **national body** along the lines of a National Tenants Voice to represent them to government. There is also a need for local organisations to represent tenants' interests in local areas to local authorities.

## 2. Policy – how to influence what government does

- We need the **Tenant Services Authority** or equivalent to make sure that landlords see it as their duty to listen to tenants. Regulation helps make this happen; it must not just be a tick-box exercise.
- The government's **priority focus on building new homes while not neglecting the existing stock and tenants** is bad for social landlords, for tenants and for local communities

- **Voting in national and local elections is controversial among tenants.** Some tenants feel there is no point in voting, as it won't change anything. But many tenants feel that not voting is very unhelpful, even if some see no point in it. Voting in local and national elections can affect the way social housing is treated and the way people are helped. *"Tenants should remember the suffragettes!"*
- **Tenants should not be used as political footballs** by different parties playing for different stakes. The basic reality is unchanged: people are still poor; there are more homeless people; and tenants face an uncertain future. So there is a need for combined, cross-party action to address these problems.
- Government budget cuts have led to **reductions in services** and local offices have often closed. The 2% rent reduction has made things worse. The government should protect social housing but this requires consistent and stable policies.
- The government needs an **empty homes policy** as there are 200,000 empty properties long term and many more underused.
- **Legislation and regulation** will force landlords to bring housing up to a safe and secure standard. There is no enforceable standard for council housing because councils cannot enforce on themselves.

### 3. Landlord relations with tenants

- The rules of engagement for landlords should encourage the following approaches:
  - **Putting yourself in tenants' shoes** – abolishing the "us and them" approach
  - Prioritising **safety**
  - Making it **mandatory to involve tenants** as happens in some other European countries e.g. Scandinavian and Germany
  - Being **honest and transparent when things can't happen and explaining why**
  - Avoiding **using IT and social media as a substitute for face-to-face contact**, rather as a complement and enhancement.
- Tenants need to feel valued members of society but they often feel looked down on like *"second class citizens"*. So recognition of their role by landlords is very important.
- If tenants and landlords work together, they can get closer to **understanding each other**. Successes bring different sides together. "If we fail, we should try again".
- Consultants for **tenant engagement in regeneration** get their brief from landlords so they *"won't really listen and involve tenants"*. Their core goal is to deliver the decision that the landlord wants; this means that paid consultants are not free to be objective. Reverting to the **"Tenants Friend" approach** would help overcome this problem.

### 4. Overcoming stigma and stereotypes

- Tenants need to demonstrate the **positive features in their communities**. It is important to celebrate achievements and recognise local heroes. Many tenants also feel they need to do more to help themselves as this leads to many positive outcomes. Residents can organise projects which people can get involved in and local projects that help the local area **show pride and build a sense of community**.
- It is important for residents to **fight stereotypes** by challenging negative attitudes and negative media stories. Government has fed the stigma attached to social housing by making reference to "sink estates" and "scroungers". This is not right and does not reflect the truth.

### 5. Social housing should be open to all

- Social housing should be **for everyone** offering a real choice at genuinely affordable rents

- Tenants worry about their **children's future** and where they will live, given the shortage of social housing, rising private rents and their own lack of assets as tenants.
- Social housing would work better and be fairer if it was more open, **with fair allocations** policies and with tenants not being forced to go where they don't want to:
  - Social housing should provide for vulnerable people
  - It should be built and managed to prevent social isolation
  - Young people have particular housing needs
- Giving those that need help access to decent, cheap and safe housing would prevent some homelessness. This requires special dedicated support and is one of many important social housing functions.
- These ideas can only work if we **stop selling off and knocking down existing** council and social housing and if we build more truly affordable housing.

## 6. Community

- *"We need quality homes that have a heart"*
- Social housing should be **rebranded as "community housing"**.
- If rented homes are secure, then they become part of the glue of communities.
- Social housing directly helps build communities and most tenants greatly value the communities where they live.
- Living in a social housing estate encourages sharing and networking, which both contribute to a sense of community.

## 7. Responses to the Grenfell fire disaster - greater care and a focus on the existing stock

- Most tenants all over the country **are deeply affected by this tragedy**. One tenant led a two minute silence as part of the Think Tank, in memory of those who died. The whole group observed this as a mark of respect.
- The Grenfell disaster has forced government and landlords to take fire safety much more seriously. The tragedy was a **big wakeup call to social landlords** and councils which has sharpened their performance and made them acutely aware of their responsibilities as landlords. There has been a noticeable shift towards allocating more staff to work in neighbourhoods since the fire happened.
- There is a **growing reluctance to demolish existing social housing** that needs investment. The obvious answer is to make good these properties so valuable social housing isn't lost. It is extremely important to keep investing in existing stock.

### **What actions should be taken by government and social landlords to help social housing survive and do well? – Tenants' suggestions**

- Invest in social housing
- Scrap the Bedroom Tax and offer benefits advice
- Bring back direct rent payments
- Regulate private renting landlords to the same standard as social landlords
- Make work pay
- Give tenants a right to green spaces
- Give them the right to withhold rent when repairs are not done
- Modernise the existing stock
- Use quality materials with stricter controls
- Be more transparent over spending

- Abolish the Right to Buy and stop selling off social rented homes
- Help communities to make decisions that affect them
- Listen more carefully and create better communication with tenants
- Remove the stigma of social housing
- Create a tenants' voice

## Analysis of findings from “The future of Social Housing Questionnaire”

35 tenants came to the Think Tank and in a special session on the first day tenants filled in a short questionnaire giving their views on the future of social housing. The findings are shown below. The findings will feed into the CIH’s larger project, “Rethinking Social Housing”. The Think Tank was a participative event allowing tenants to discuss their ideas and share their thinking on the future of social housing. There was a strong thread running through their ideas: tenants should have a voice and be heard; landlords should offer good services and support communities; there should be more affordable housing and stronger government support. Below is a summary of tenants’ responses to ten questions around these themes.

### 1) What are the main benefits and advantages of social housing? (32 responses)

Most participants think the main advantages of social housing are security of tenure, a good community, and affordable rents.

Themes	Total
Security of tenure	14
Good community	14
Affordable rents	12
Helping vulnerable people in housing need	6
Safe environment	4
Giving people opportunities	6
decent standard of home, good repairs	7
Living near family	4

*“The main benefit is that social housing creates a basis for a successful and sustainable life. The chance to have a secure home for as long as you want to. It gives the opportunity to build roots and family life in a community”*

*“It is the cheapest, best maintained, most secure form of housing in the country”*

*“It provides real affordable housing to people. A home where people can live safely”*

### 2) What are the biggest problems with social housing? (31 responses)

Most participants say the biggest problem with social housing is that there is not enough of it for everyone who needs it and a lack of funding to expand the stock. 12 people consider the main problem to be not the housing itself but the negative stigma of living in social housing; and eight believe that bad maintenance and management of existing stock is the biggest problem.

Themes	Total
Not enough social housing and lack of funding	24
Stigma and grouping together disadvantaged people in unstable homes	12
Poor maintenance and management of existing stock	8

Becoming less accessible	3
ASB and tenants don't look after the area	3
Landlords not listening to tenants	2
Unaffordable rents	2
Bedroom tax and benefit reform	2
Lack of diversity and cultural divisions	2

*"People think everybody in social housing is on benefits, never worked and don't deserve to live in a nice property in a nice area"*

*"Stigma, why do I have to call my flat social housing? It is my home full stop. Why call where I live an estate, community is far better"*

### 3) What do you like most about your home and where you live? (31 responses)

25 people say their neighbours and community is the best thing, mirroring what people see as the main advantage of social housing, showing the importance of community. 18 people think the location of their housing is the best thing about their homes.

Themes	Total
Neighbours, community, safety and security, raised my family here	25
good area/location	18
Good quality/well maintained	10
Having a voice	5
That it's my own home	4
Transport	2
Diversity	2
Gives opportunities	2

*"I actually like living in high rise it is a good example of brutalist architecture"*

*"The community where people try and work together"*

### 4) What do you like least? (31 responses)

People's main issue with their housing is how it is maintained and managed. 6 people found nothing wrong with their housing.

Themes	Total
Poor quality/badly maintained, lack of face to face contact with staff	11
Crime and ASB	4
Lack of green space	3
Stigma	3
Bad communication with landlord	2

Social housing being phased out	2
Nothing	6

*“The constant mould and heating breaking”*

*“Slow response for jobs to be completed”*

*“No care taken by the workmen to do the job to a decent standard”*

**5a) What works best in the area where you live? (22 responses)**

8 people think the community is what works best in the area, which reflects the earlier answers. Four people think tenants having a voice is what works best in the community.

Themes	Total
community	8
tenants have a voice	4
mixed demographic	2
good amenities	2
safe and secure	2
good environment	2

*“The community coming out and working together, people do things to help others”*

**5b) What doesn't work well in the area you live? (10 responses)**

Seven people think the landlord not involving tenants and tenants not getting involved are the biggest problems in their area. Landlords listening to tenants is one of the factors tenants find works best. These answers underline the importance of having a voice.

Themes	Total
Landlord not involving tenants and more tenants need to get involved in groups	7
Stigma / bad location	6
Properties need repairing	2

*“Engage with tenants in each of the areas in ways which are relevant to them”*

**6) What can your landlord do to improve your area? (30 responses)**

The main finding (14) is that landlords should work with and listen to residents to strengthen the community, underlining the significance of landlord openness to residents.

Themes	Total
Listen and work with residents, help build the community	19
Improve outdoor areas	10
Keep homes to a good standard	3
Improve allocations policy- make it fair	2



*“Listen to tenants and act on their views”*

**7) What are the barriers to helping people in need of a home? (30 responses)**

People believe a lack of affordable housing and welfare reforms are the main barriers to helping people in need of a home.

Themes	Total
Lack of affordable housing / lack of money	19
Welfare reforms	12
Complicated application system	4
Problems with staff	4
Allocation policy	3
Lack of well paid jobs/unemployment	3
Too many empty homes	2
Right to buy / private properties	2

*“Not enough availability and it should be open to everyone regardless of age, earnings and income”*

*“Affordability, lack of housing, poor paid occupations and welfare reform”*

**8) What should the government do to help? (31 responses)**

The Government needs to fund social housing both by maintaining the existing stock and building more homes since the lack of affordable housing is the main barrier to people accessing housing.

Themes	Total
More funding to maintain housing	14
Build more affordable housing and help social landlords do this	11
Listen to and work with tenants and ensure social landlords do the same	6
Review benefits system	5
Tackle stigma	4
Make landlords accountable by law	3
Fill empty properties	2
Keep same housing minister	2
Help build communities	2

*“Build social housing with social housing rents”*

*“Build more social housing at rents people really can afford, U-turn on bedroom tax and rethink their attitude to social housing”*

**9) What should social landlords do to help people in need of a home? (30 responses)**

Participants have similar priorities for landlords as for government most importantly, working with tenants, building more homes, and filling empty homes, an issue that didn't come through as at this point.

Themes	Total
Listen and work with tenants	9

Build homes for social rent	8
Fill empty properties	6
Fairer allocations policy	5
Support services for tenants	3
Maintain existing homes	3
Help build communities	2
Better lettings system	2
Tackle stigma	2
Work with government	2
Work with organisations that tackle homelessness	2

*“The social landlords need to provide a range of services themselves that help residents sustain tenancies and create successful communities”*

#### **10) What role can tenants play in helping social housing work better? (31 responses)**

The main answer is to get involved in tenants’ groups and encourage other people to do the same. Working with landlords is also popular. Both show the importance of tenant’s voice, which is a key overall finding.

<b>Themes</b>	<b>Total</b>
Get involved in tenants groups and your community and encourage other people to do the same	19
Work with landlord and report repairs as soon as they happen	13
Make your voices heard	8
Be proud of where you live and look after it	5
Get to know your neighbours	2

*“Be proud of their housing, take care of it inside and outside, talk about it in a positive way”*

*“Make their voices heard! Demand to be included in the decision making process in all aspects”*

## **Overview**

The responses of 35 tenants reveal tenants' overall priorities:

- Being heard and having good communication with landlords;
- Expanding the supply of low cost housing and making it secure;
- Strengthening local communities and supporting tenants who need help
- Maintaining properties with care and improving the existing stock through quality services, including repairs.

There are many smaller points but the strong focus of tenants' views is on their landlord, their home and community and the need for more social renting coupled with the desire to overcome the stigma.

## Analysis of findings from “The role of social housing Questionnaire”

At the end of the two day Think Tank participants pooled their ideas on the role of social housing in response to the Chartered Institute of Housing Questionnaire. The findings are shown below.

The two-day Think Tank encouraged tenants to share their ideas on leading issues facing social landlords. The questionnaires were given to all participants at the event.

### 1) What is social housing? (29 responses)

The majority of tenants think that social housing is a genuinely affordable for of rented housing, offering secure tenancies for people in need.

Themes	Total
Genuinely affordable, secure tenancies, for people in housing need	21
Secure tenancy	13
For people in housing need	11
Provided by council or HA , regulated	11
Builds communities and is safe	12
Place where people want to live	7
Diverse range of people	4
High quality with good repairs and maintenance	3
Choice based lettings system	2

*“Housing provided for people on low incomes or with particular need by Government agencies or non-profit organisation”*

*“Social housing is homes for people provided by the public sector. It offers secure, safe and long term homes for diverse groups of people”*

### 2) What does social housing do? (29 responses)

Social housing has several key functions, offering; security; a sense of community; low cost renting; secure tenancies.

Themes	Total
Offers secure tenure	14
Builds communities	14
Provides affordable, high quality and well managed housing	12
Gives tenants opportunities and a voice	9
Supports tenants and provides safe housing	8
Provides housing for vulnerable people and those in need	5
Houses a diverse range of people	4
Houses those who don’t want to or can’t buy or rent in private sector	3
Provides housing for everyone	2

*“It provides secure homes for tenants. It creates communities of people in the area they live”*

*“Provide affordable housing, security and community buildings. It empowers people to feel valued members of society”*

### **3) Who is social housing for? (29 responses)**

The majority of tenants think social housing should be available to everyone by choice (18). However 14 people think it should prioritise those in need and those who cannot afford to buy.

<b>Themes</b>	<b>Total</b>
For everyone by choice	18
Those in priority need	14
Those who cannot afford or don't want to buy	10

*“Everyone from a variety of backgrounds without discrimination. A tenure of choice, meeting a need for people to access affordable housing to those who are unable or do not want to buy”*

*“All people who want a safe and secure home”*

### **4) What should the role and purpose of social housing be? (28 responses)**

The role and purpose of social housing is to provide genuinely affordable and secure homes. People also think it is important to maintain it to a good standard. 12 people think it is important that social housing can be a choice for everyone.

<b>Themes</b>	<b>Total</b>
Genuinely affordable and for everyone – by choice	33
Secure and safe tenure	27
Well maintained at a good standard	14
Builds diverse communities	9
Regulated by government	5
Landlord looking after tenants, matching needs, being open and transparent	8

*“For anyone who needs a home in a safe environment”*

*“Be affordable, well managed and safe for people who do not wish or can't afford to buy”*

### **Overview**

The core purpose of social housing, according to tenants unanimously, is to provide genuinely affordable, secure and safe homes for everyone who closes to live in social housing. Social housing today is genuinely affordable, offering secure tenancies for people in need. In doing this, it strengthens communities and gives tenants a voice.

## Key findings from table discussions

These are the key findings from 24 hour event which brought together 35 social housing tenants. There were 6 sessions, each session had a series of questions which were discussed across 6 tables. The main point from each table is below.

### Session 1

#### Who does the housing crisis affect the most?

- 1) People on low incomes, across the whole country.
- 2) Families, the young, elderly, people on low incomes.
- 3) Vulnerable, working class, homeless, refugees, future generations.
- 4) Everybody in housing need.
- 5) Those without safe, secure and adequate housing.
- 6) Young people unable to leave home and people on housing benefit as many people won't take them.

#### How does the crisis affect them?

- 1) Can't afford rent; housing benefit cap; lack of social housing.
- 2) Bedroom tax, food banks, mental and physical health, rise in homelessness; isolation in communities.
- 3) People can't access accommodation; living in houses which don't meet their needs.
- 4) Homelessness has risen; benefit system changes.
- 5) Impacts on wider community eg crime, health

#### What should be done about it?

- 1) Make rents affordable; build more homes; fill empty properties; set up a scheme for key workers.
- 2) Access to genuinely affordable housing; accountability of policy makers; policies are followed through eg Decent Homes standard.
- 3) Better use of existing stock; fill empty homes; ensure homes are a decent standard; build more social housing.
- 4) Keep housing minister in post.
- 5) Higher rate of development to make housing more affordable; abolish bedroom tax; work with communities to improve estates; allow under 20s to access housing.

### Session 2

#### What should the role and purpose of social housing be?

- 1) Open to everyone at low cost; build successful communities; offer a variety of accommodation; allowing people to feel valued as a member of society.
- 2) It should be rebranded with no stigma and should be a choice for all.
- 3) Landlords should be open and transparent, creating a safe and cohesive environment; well maintained, with a holistic role; supporting people living there; with fair allocations policy; genuine tenant involvement
- 4) It should bring the community together; create an inclusive atmosphere for everyone; offer secure tenancies and provide a safe and clean environment for people to live in.

- 5) Provide a safe space for those on low incomes; support tenants when needed; sustain strong communities; and make the country a better place.
- 6) Prevent homelessness; enable downsizing by choice; ensure quality and create homes not houses; offer long term secure tenancies

### Session 3

#### How can we celebrate the value of Social Housing? (30 responses)

All participants set out how they thought we should celebrate the value of social housing. The most common findings were that people should be proud of where they live and promote widely the successes of social housing.

Themes	Total
Be proud of where you live and look after it	9
Promote success stories of social housing to a wider audience	7
Promote community spirit and look after each other	4
Organise events for the community	4
Celebrate 100 Years of social housing	4
Hold a social housing day every year to publicize its value	3
Build more social housing	2
Promote the idea that Social Housing gives people a high quality of life in good homes	2
Give tenants a platform to give their views at events	1

### Session 4

#### Have there been any changes in the service provided by your landlord?

- 1) Changes in organisational structure making it harder for tenants to get involved; a lack of trust in tenants; no face to face contact.
- 2) Repairs service has improved and tenants recommendations have been listened to
- 3) All buildings over 3 floors are now inspected for fire risks; 1% rent cut is used as an excuse to cut tenant involvement; an increase in service charges.
- 4) Cuts to the senior management team; cuts to customer involvement officers; bringing services back in house as a result of work done by the scrutiny panel.
- 5) Local housing office has closed; lack of communication with landlord; repairs taking longer.
- 6) Rent reduction led to service cuts and job losses; Housing officers now have bigger patches.

#### What changes need to take place to improve things in your community?

- 1) Better communication; change in attitude of landlord; and clear legislation and regulation.
- 2) Councils must stop wasting money and be more transparent about their spending; investing in quality estate management would help; do what needs to be done for the people that pay your wages.
- 3) Listen to tenants; inform tenants of changes; give tenants choice; understand value for money; don't always go for the cheapest option as it can end up costing more in the long run.

- 4) Prioritise tenant involvement; create a programme of community cohesion; have a good knowledge of who is living in the community; and use social media to communicate with tenants.
- 5) Need more meaningful communication and accountability.
- 6) More investment in housing for social rent, more positive engagement with tenants; a £1 per week levy ring fenced to support community engagement activities.

## **Session 6**

### **What are the main management issues in your estate?**

- 1) Lack of management; lack of communication; and lack of clarity about who is responsible for what.
- 2) ASB and drug abuse; lack of contact with estate officers; lack of pride in community; and bad private landlords.
- 3) Lack of investment in stock; overcrowding; tenants not listened to; and mergers between housing associations
- 4) Lack of understanding of what's going on in the estate; not listening to tenants; and lack of tolerance between leaseholders and tenants.
- 5) Littering and general bad maintenance.
- 6) Housing officers being over stretched; over reliance on email; not enough opportunity for conversation; issues not resolved the first time they are raised.

### **What are possible solutions?**

- 1) Need co-operation between residents, landlord and external organisations
- 2) Community centres open to all; community clean ups; community events to raise funds; housing patrols and CCTV (paid for by landlord); reporting ASB.
- 3) Honesty- explain why something can't happen and what the solutions are; Housing associations should have a statutory obligation to house people.
- 4) Better allocation of resources and better accountability- who is responsible for what.
- 5) Security lighting installed by the landlord; estate champions to liaise with landlord on issues such as cutting shrubbery etc. ; landlord to inform residents on who is responsible and who to contact.
- 6) Clear categorising of issues- which are the priorities; honesty about what is possible; and frontline staff empowered to fix problems.

### **Who is responsible?**

- 1) Landlord but tenants should take responsibility for some issues themselves
- 3) Everyone is responsible for maintaining the community; the landlord is responsible for maintaining houses and the estate, but tenants must take pride in their homes.
- 4) Shared responsibility between landlords and tenants.



## Session 7

### If you were in charge what would you do?

- Invest money
- Re-claim the word affordable
- Build accommodation to meet need
- Scrap bedroom tax
- Sort out welfare reform
- Make councils justify numbers of homeless people
- Regulate private renting
- Make work pay
- Withhold rent when things aren't done
- Maintain current housing stock
- Organise better tenant engagement
- Give benefit advice
- Make council spending transparent
- Emphasise the value of Social Housing
- Learn from other countries
- Have stricter building regulations and stricter enforcement
- Re-brand Social Housing to remove the stigma