

Headlines for Housing Plus Academy Workshop

What will the Social Housing White Paper mean for social landlords?

17th March 2021

The Social Housing White Paper (SHWP) published in November 2020 underlines the central importance of the relationship between landlords and tenants. It requires greater transparency and accountability, and a designated person in charge of health and safety to improve fire safety in homes and buildings. This 2-hour online workshop, attended by 35 representatives from social landlords across the UK, explored what these changes would mean in practice and what changes were already being made.

1. **What tenants need to feel safe in their homes:** A major focus of the White Paper is on improving fire safety in buildings. Some landlords are pre-empting changes in regulation following the recommendations of the Grenfell Inquiry (Part 1), with many already taking action to improve the safety of the homes they are responsible for. Riverside is creating a new lettings standard, which will include requiring smoke alarms in all properties and consultation with residents on electrical safety.

Participants stressed that all homes need to be safe, not just high-rise buildings. Safety work needs to cover risks, including keeping an up-to-date record of who lives in buildings, and the exact layout of each floor of a building. The new regulation needs to be clear and unambiguous, covering all types of buildings.

2. **Engaging with tenants:** Tenants often know the buildings they live in better than their landlord does and can pick up on safety issues ahead of the landlord. This happened with the Grenfell Tower residents. Tenants also need to understand their responsibilities and what they must do to keep homes safe, for example, the importance of keeping landings and other communal areas clear and not drilling into party walls.
3. **Leasehold properties within blocks:** While many social landlords have made major efforts to improve the safety of their own properties, it is hard to guarantee the safety of the whole block when leasehold properties are let out through private landlords or sublet. One housing association is considering taking back the ownership of front doors of private flats so they ensure their replacement with fire safety compliant doors, which would end up cheaper and more straightforward than forcing the leaseholder to arrange and pay for the work. Another

suggestion was that the government should provide truly low-cost affordable loans for leaseholders to cover the costs of fire safety works.

4. **Balancing the cost of improving the fire safety of homes with the need to achieve net-zero:**

Improving the energy efficiency of properties while making them safe will require very significant investment. Research published by Inside Housing estimates that achieving net-zero carbon by 2050 will cost £104 billion across the social housing sector, or around £20,000 per unit. Paying for the necessary upgrading works will impact social landlord's development plans.

There are innovative ways to reduce the cost of environmental upgrading such as a "Warms Homes Rent" where the rent of retrofitted homes is set slightly higher than the standard rent level as a result of lower energy bills resulting from the investment. This extra rent income can be used to cover the cost of the works. Overall, the tenant does not end up paying more due to the money they will save on energy bills.

5. **Tenants need to understand the new technology involved in energy saving:** Tenants are often wary of their new energy-efficient homes and feel more at home with more traditional design and construction methods. This is one of the disadvantages of retrofit. While tenants' homes are warm and more comfortable to live in, some tenants overheat their homes, do not control their thermostats effectively, and open windows to let out the heat. It is crucial that landlords provide accessible, clear information about any energy-efficiency changes to peoples' homes.

6. **Embedding tenant engagement in all levels of the organisation:** This is not just the responsibility of a dedicated community involvement team. Tenants see staff as part of the organisation rather than as belonging to a particular team. Frontline staff, such as caretakers, wardens and repair workers, can pick up on any problems tenants may have. There must be a proper reporting and follow-up system so any issues they pick up on can be dealt with. There should also be training for those front-line staff in listening to, recording, reporting and following up on issues.

Different forms of engagement encourage more tenants to get involved. Not everyone wants to be consistently and actively engaged in formal structures through meetings and tenants' committees. The views of the "silent majority" need to be heard. It is important to

have both formal engagement methods, such as tenants' organisations, consultation or scrutiny panels, and also more informal engagement, for example organising fun days which also allow tenants to share ideas. Landlords need to find innovative ways to engage tenants, Network Homes organised a "big winter check-in", a mail-out to all tenants to get their correct contact information and give them a chance to share any problems. It was very successful, and they reached many to tenants who they do not normally engage with.

Landlords should also find out from tenants how they prefer to be contacted. Irwell Valley Homes asked all their tenants how they would prefer to be contacted: by phone; text; Zoom etc. This simple "ask" greatly improved landlord-tenant engagement. It is important to make it easy for tenants to talk about the issues that are important to them. Metropolitan Thames Valley has created a specially designated team whose job is to talk with tenants about any issues they have.

7. **The value of complaints:** Tenants need to feel engagement is productive and worth their time. One housing association set up a "*You Said, We Did*" event to show what has changed as a result of the tenant's inputs. If something cannot change it is important to explain to tenants why this is the case. Accessible complaints procedures are a critical route to engagement and problems being dealt with. Landlords need to encourage tenants to complain so they can pick up on any issues, but a measure that simply counts the number of complaints may deter landlords from giving tenants a good complaints platform. There must be clear ways to tackle complaints and to feedback to the complainant. The number of complaints should not be classed as a measure of problems. With a clear and active complaints procedure, the key measure is the level of speed and accuracy of response, not the number of complaints.

8. **The COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns have increased reliance on digital communication.** In some organisations, this has been very successful. Home Group set up one scheme which saw 28 residents regularly participating in their online tenant's meetings, compared to six residents when the events took place physically. However, online engagement does not work for all tenants and face-to-face contact needs to be retained for some activities. There needs to be a balance between online, digital engagement, and direct contact.

For online engagement to succeed landlords need to provide training and support to tenants to access online services and use platforms such as Zoom.

Some landlords are thinking about new ways to engage tenants online. Magenta Living is developing a new platform that will work in a similar way to a social media account in that it can be updated quickly and easily compared to a website, but tenants would not have to use their personal social media accounts to talk to their landlord. Jewish Community Housing Association is in the process of developing a new app where tenants can easily log any issues they may have.

9. **Training for tenant empowerment:** Tenants need the right skills to challenge their landlord and take action in their communities. At Network Housing, tenant training is delivered by the senior leadership team. This helps tenants feel valued and shows a commitment from the housing association to tenant engagement. Other housing associations train tenants to deliver training to other tenants. They say some tenants feel more comfortable engaging with other tenants who have the same lived experience as them.

10. **Requirements for more information to tenants and new measures to compare landlord performance.** There needs to be a consultation with tenants to ensure the measures are meaningful and pick up on issues that tenants care about. Social landlords need to make this information accessible, so tenants can understand it and apply it productively.

11. **Scale and spread of national housing associations:** For housing associations that work across the UK, there is a major challenge in responding locally to local problems. The performance of the landlord and the housing market conditions may vary in different parts of the UK and there will be very different challenges. Local responses that pick up on these differences will be crucial to success.

Conclusion

The Social Housing White paper raises many challenges for social landlords. It is provoking action by landlords to “get ahead of the problems” and it should open the door to much more meaningful tenant engagement.