

Headline report from:

Landlords at the Crossroads: Restoring frontline housing management

19th-20th May 2022, Trafford Hall

On 19th-20th May 2022, the Housing Plus Academy held a 24-hour Think Tank with 26 participants representing social landlords, housing cooperatives, TMOs, and community development organisations, to uncover the challenges facing social landlords, lessons learned from the pandemic, and the role of frontline housing management in responding.

1. **Frontline housing management has a number of benefits**, primarily allowing staff to build close and trusting relationships with residents giving managers a good understanding of problems as they occur; and the ability to deal with problems quickly and efficiently. It gives residents a clear, single point of contact. Housing managers should be able to identify and deal with problems on an estate before a resident has to report it.
2. **Social landlords are facing new challenges**, both in their operations and in meeting residents' needs. Social landlords face competing demands as they balance the need to deliver additional homes for social rent, alongside the need to invest in their existing homes to ensure they are safe and energy efficient. Rising costs and supply chain issues are also impacting landlords, coupled with widespread staff recruitment and retention difficulties. Residents are facing increased financial difficulties due to the rising cost of living and there are widespread ongoing mental health challenges exacerbated by the pandemic
3. **The pandemic created a learning opportunity for social landlords**. Many back-room staff had contact with residents for the first time, showing them the value of the organisation and of talking directly to residents. Landlords reached out to residents, exposing failing systems and processes, for example out of date contact information. For some residents, this was the first time they had been contacted by their landlord since moving in to their property. Generally, people were positive about this contact. Some landlords developed new ways of using technology to help report repairs, for example residents sending pictures via phone cameras. Some landlords have continued with this approach as a more efficient way of dealing with repairs. During the pandemic. EastEndHomes realised the importance of caretaking staff being the landlords "eyes and ears" on the ground, picking up problems that may have been overlooked. It is important these staff are valued and given training on how to identify problems or issues.

Smaller housing organisations found that the pandemic and the changes it brought reinforced their view that frontline, face-to-face management is the best way to manage their homes. For example, Hull Churches, a small housing association where housing managers have regular in-person contact with residents, found that problems such as hoarding escalated when regular face-to-face contact was withdrawn.

4. **Trust between landlords and residents is crucial**. Building trust and improving accountability underpin landlord- tenant relations. The National Housing Federation's Together with

Tenants Charter¹, outlines what residents want and how trust can be built. Residents need a clear point of contact with a member of staff. Every interaction a social landlord has with a tenant can build or break trust. All staff training should include treating residents with respect. Residents need to feel listened to, and know that their participation produces actual change. Social landlords must be transparent with residents, and involve them from the start of a process, not as an afterthought. Building trust back takes time, commitment, and patience.

5. **A return to local patch-based management is happening** due to both staff and residents feeling frustrated with remote systems. It has become too complicated to report problems and have them resolved, and as a result issues escalate. For patch-based management to be successful, staff need to be able to take decisions at a local level and make changes, to meet the needs of their residents.

When making substantial changes to the way an organisation works, staff need to be involved and always the right skills to carry out new roles. L&Q is pioneering a new patch-based approach, while L&Q was developing this new approach to localised management, directors sat down with staff to talk about the changes and respond to initial worries. They have set up a specialist training programme to support staff. Neighbourhood (patch) officers will door knock every house in their new patch to introduce themselves to residents in the first few months. Neighbourhood patch managers will have a team of local housing staff so residents can always reach someone with detailed, local knowledge.

Returning to local patch-based management can increase costs initially due to higher local staff numbers, but it should save money by dealing with problems quickly and not allowing issues to escalate. Cost-benefit analysis and social return on investment calculations demonstrate the value of this approach. EastEndHomes recently undertook a cost-benefit analysis of its neighbourhood housing management, which demonstrated the benefits of their localised housing service for residents and staff.

6. **A concierge service adds value in multi-storey buildings.** Holland Rise and Whitebeam TMO has a concierge service based in their high-rise tower block. The concierge manages who is coming in and out of the building, and acts as the first point of contact if residents have problems. They carry out building and estate inspections twice a day and pick up on problems (such as broken fire doors), helping to ensure the block is safe. The concierge also deals with tradesmen and contractors working in the building, ensuring they are doing the right job. The concierge service costs residents £12 a week per household. Residents value the service and are happy to pay the additional charge for the sense of safety and security that the concierge service provides.
7. **Reporting repairs is the main direct contact that residents have with their landlord.** It can be problematic if not resolved efficiently. Contractors and in-house repairs teams need to treat residents with respect and deal with repairs quickly and effectively. Landlords must retain responsibility for the contractors work, and carefully monitor progress. Clarion trade operatives have received safeguarding training and the organisation has introduced a service called “Wellbeing 10”; whereby 10 minutes is built into every repair job to allow the repairs

¹ <https://www.housing.org.uk/globalassets/files/together-with-tenants/together-with-tenants-charter.pdf>

operative to chat to residents and pick up on any safeguarding or wellbeing issues. Clarion have received a lot of positive feedback from residents on this approach, although it entails additional responsibility for on-the-ground operatives. Clarion residents are now given the opportunity to rate a repair out of 5 via text. If they report a 1 or 2 (i.e poor), this will be followed up with a phone call to try and resolve the problem.

Together Housing operates a system whereby a certain standard is set for contractors and if the standard is not met, payment for services can be retained.

8. **Landlords are having to make decisions about how much of their service should be delivered online.** The pandemic accelerated this debate. There are benefits to online services for residents; it can save people time and money not having to travel to an office, or spend time on the phone, to report a problem. It can also help some vulnerable residents who may be nervous about face-to-face contact. The new Clarion online system, for example, gives residents more freedom to pick when they want their repair issue dealt with. Online systems can also free up staff time to deal with more complex issues. EMH Homes always offer an individual meeting when a tenant records a Stage 2 complaint. Take up for this service has increased since offering the option of a video call for this meeting, compared with meeting in person. There is a lot of value in these discussions, and it allows EMH to deal with problems much more effectively. As mentioned above, Holland Rise and Whitebeam TMO now encourage residents to send a photo when reporting a repair online, which has made it easier for operatives to deal with problems quickly as they know what tools and parts to bring to the job.

However, not everyone will be able to, or will want to, engage online and it is important that these people are also supported and retain the option for alternative contact in person and by telephone. Online systems and services have to work effectively to ensure that queries are responded to by the correct person or team at the right time. In some complex cases, it could be harder to resolve problems online without the conversational approach and the visual cues and body language.

9. **The pandemic led to a major uptake in home working.** Staff argue that home-based work can be more agile. Many back-room roles within social housing providers can readily be done from home as well as from the office. This helps staff members who have long commutes or who balance caring responsibilities with work. Reducing the number of those commuting to workplaces could help with decarbonisation, as car journeys are reduced. On the other hand, it can be important for staff morale to have regular contact with the rest of the team, and not everyone has the right facilities to work from home. New and younger staff specifically need to learn by direct contact. Most social landlords favour a hybrid model, accommodating the needs of their staff alongside responsibilities to residents.
10. **Social landlords need regular contact with their residents to pick up on needs and problems.** Starley Housing Co-op run regular fun days and trips to develop and sustain contact with tenants. It requires constant effort to engage with more vulnerable and hard-to-reach residents who, for various reasons such as anxiety or lack of confidence, are reluctant to contact their landlord. Clarion run MOT days, where they door knock (particularly targeting zero repairs reported homes) and have a repairs team available onsite

to deal with any immediate problems. Clarion have found this service to be an effective means of reaching people that wouldn't normally come forward to ask for help.

Residents want very different levels of engagement with their landlord. Hull Churches found that some more vulnerable residents are really pleased with regular phone calls, but some find it intrusive. They are currently trialling a text-based check in service.

11. In conclusion, changes over the pandemic and subsequent moves back to regular face-to-face contact with residents have shown the value of frontline housing management. It helps build trust with residents, creates accountability, and ensures problems are dealt with quickly and efficiently. Social landlords must work to ensure that staff at all levels treat residents with respect and honesty, as well as creating a clear channel for communication with residents, to guarantee that no problem is forgotten or overlooked.

Messages to Government and social landlords

At the end of the workshop we asked participants to propose the key changes government and social landlords should make to improve their service and support residents.

Messages to Social Landlords

- Ensure that properties are always in a good state of repair, and any problems are dealt with quickly and efficiently.
- Have a housing officer as the single point of contact so that residents can get help directly with problems or questions.
- Provide training for staff so they can support residents with financial difficulties such as rent arrears.
- Treat all residents respectfully and honestly.
- Give residents real influence over how their homes are managed.

Messages to Government

- Ensure social landlords are providing a consistent service across the country
- Provide funding for training for housing managers to help them deliver an efficient service to residents.
- Ensure the new regulatory framework empowers staff to deliver a full local management service to tenants.
- Have more regular contact between government (DLHC) and social landlords, so officials and policy makers understand what is happening on the ground.
- Help people with the rising cost of living through increased benefits and funding to support organisations such as Citizens Advice, where social landlords can signpost people for support.
- Strengthen the policy to support residents to form TMOs and Housing Co-ops.
- Provide more grant funding to build more social housing.