

## Headlines from Housing Plus Academy workshop:

### Investing to Save - How can landlords work with their tenants?

1. **Landlord-tenant relations are central to making low cost renting work:**
  - Trust is built up, so rent payments, care of property, staff motivation all improve. Once tenants understand landlords are trying to be good landlords they feel they have more duty to pay rent.
  
2. **If landlords work closely with residents and engage them in decisions, they benefit directly:**
  - Repairs are performed to a higher standard.
  - Mistakes and faulty work are recognised more quickly.
  - Priorities for spending are more attuned to tenants needs.
  - There is quicker detection of tenants' problems, which then become easier to resolve.
  - There is more accurate information on most aspects of community relations between landlords and enforcement conditions.
  - There are generally better relations between landlords and tenants and more satisfied tenants and staff.
  - There is easier communication with leaseholders and better understanding of leaseholder issues e.g. sub-letting, private renting, investment costs, safety etc.
  
3. **Most tenants have lived for five years or more on their estate or areas.** Tenants know more about their estate, their block and their home, than many staff, who turn over quite quickly.
  - They have often lived there longer than housing staff have been in post.
  - They witness directly the many changes, investments, problems, "comings and goings" of where they live. They are the "eyes on the street".
  - When tenants have a direct link to the landlord they can report directly when things are not working. They are a constant presence on the ground and so can help the landlord "plug the gaps".
  
4. **Tenants want to feel in control of their home and surroundings,** but as tenants they often find this difficult. Landlords have responsibility for all common areas and for collective supervision and maintenance. Individual tenants have limited control of shared spaces in estates of rented housing, particularly in blocks of flats. This can seriously hamper tenant-landlord relations unless there is a landlord's management presence locally, and the landlord exercises proper control over conditions in line with tenants' aspirations.
  
5. **Social housing has become stigmatised as a tenure.** This makes many tenants feel like "second class citizens". Landlords need to develop positive relations with tenants

in order to create confidence among tenants and the wider community on the intrinsic value of social housing. Positive tenant relations and structured tenant involvement help social landlords to do this- making social more “normal” and more widely accepted as useful for housing people in need but also for attracting and retaining a broader band of the population. Social housing is made up of thousands of communities of residents who help society work better.

6. **Many landlords think of resident involvement as a “nice to have” extra rather than fundamental to their role and function.** Most landlords accept working with tenants is important, but it is interrupted in many different ways and many landlords are a long way from realising how tenants can actually help their performance as well as their community conditions.
7. **Involving residents is not simply about giving feedback on maintenance reporting repairs and anti-social behaviours. It needs to** engage residents directly in decisions about issues that affect the community as a whole. This helps the social landlords prioritise in a different way and approach major funding choices with residents’ views to help. Obviously this only works if landlords take seriously what residents say and develop priorities in a transparent way.
8. **Landlords can take many steps to make tenants feel more valued and more in control:**
  - Encourage community representatives to be part of interview panels for appointing staff.
  - Being represented on local, regional, central and specialist boards.
  - Carrying out joint inspection of conditions.
  - Having scope to tackle environmental problems.
  - Having block representatives on multi-storey estates.
  - Supporting tenant and residents’ associations.
  - Encouraging and supporting community initiatives and community organisations.
9. **Public attitudes toward social housing have changed over the last 2 years.** There is much wider recognition today of the need for social housing. Government now recognises that it offers good value for money, and that it should be protected and enhanced as a valuable asset.
10. **Tenants need encouragement and support if they are to get involved and take on significant responsibilities:**
  - All tenants should receive straightforward clear information on all issues related to tenancies
  - Landlords should provide meeting places and other forms of support activities that engage different groups making sure that residents of different ethnic origin are welcome and treated fairly; that different age groups are catered for and that respect and equal treatment are shown to diverse groups on the estate.

- Tenants need solid training in management issues before taking on responsible roles in the housing association. There are serious legal and financial duties attached to board members.

**11. It is important that community representation is fair, transparent and open**

- Landlords need to provide face to face contact as well as online contact so that the area of rented housing is well managed. Community based activity must be both open and fair and genuinely bringing benefit to the wider community. This is a very important landlord responsibility that will work if there is a basis of trust between tenants and landlords and proper training is organised for both tenants and staff.

**12. Staff need preparation and training for greater resident involvement and community problem solving.** For staff members it is challenging to develop positive relationships on an equal footing with tenants. Staff need special skills and tools to respond and act upon tenants' needs. The way the housing service is delivered, and the way neighbourhoods are managed is key to how staff do their job.

**13. That leads to one of the biggest shifts in the way landlords relate directly to tenants** - returning to frontline management, intensifying that approach, reducing and contracting patch sizes.

**14. Regeneration and upgrading housing areas pose special requirements for landlords to work with residents.** The more radical the plans the greater the need for intensive consultation and co-operation. Often however, with investment plans, key decisions have already been made and tenants feel fairly powerless, or are sometimes over-ruled. Adopting an approach of co-design and co-production seems to work best. But there are often divided opinions within communities that receive a significant investment of time and resources. Tenants are usually keen on upgrading and improvements. It is possible to do very radical re-design and upgrading work with tenants in situ.

**15. One of the biggest challenges facing large social landlords is the scale of their operations and the dispersal of their stock across 100s or more local authorities.** Some national housing associations struggle devising suitable methods for engaging with their tenants, both in their local communities and on a national scale. One common approach is more decentralised and with a clear commitment to more personalised frontline management.

Recommendations on ways forward for social landlords in working with tenants

- Landlords can recognise that tenants have an important role to play in making communities work.

- Tenant training will help empower tenants and give them the skills to play an influential and useful role in their housing association.
- Proposed government regulation will require social landlords to encourage tenant participation, involvement and influence in the management of their homes and related policies.
- Tenants need to have more recourse when things go wrong.
- There should be training for staff on how to work with tenants, highlighting its importance.
- Landlords need to use a variety of informal methods to engage tenants, such as coffee mornings, door knocking and tenants groups, to ensure as wide representation as possible.

### Key examples of good practice

- Optivo housing association is an illustration of how a committed and determined landlord can involve tenants as partners in a joint effort to make their landlords services exemplary. They have saved £2.7 million in the areas of procurement, complaints, and the customer experience as a result of involving representatives. The key steps they have taken include:
  - Development of new policies in co-operation with tenants creates a sense of ownership and pride among residents and staff. All new policies are presented to a residents' board and must be approved by it.
  - A quarter of the association's board is made up of tenants. This helps to build trust between the housing association and tenants and ensures tenants' voices are heard. Having a group of trained and supported tenants as part of the main board instils confidence and develops new skills among tenants and new approaches among professionals.
  - Involvement has been shown to improve resident satisfaction which also means the staff feel less pressured
  - The direct relationship between staff and tenants means that problems can be dealt with more quickly, and problems are also resolved on the basis of clearer information.
  
- A number of housing associations including SOHA and Community Gateway Housing among others have adopted a mutual or membership model respectively, where tenants, leaseholders and even individuals from the wider community can become 'members' (and shareholders in the case of a mutual). Members can vote on key policy areas, attend Annual General Meetings (AGMs) and hold the organisation and board members to account for the work they do.
  
- As a large housing association with dispersed stock, Home Group has reintroduced patches so housing managers can be more aware of their local areas. They also now have the board meeting in various locations and have made the format more accessible so more tenants can get involved. Home Group have two residents on both the Home Group Board and Home Scotland Board. The Board is responsible for all key decisions, from approving the budget to monitoring performance. They recruit Customer Board Members every three years. To promote transparency and straight forward communication with their residents, Home Group have a group called the Keep It Short and Simple communications group, or KISS. Staff members send documents to the KISS group to be assessed using KISS standards:
  - Short and simple
  - Customer and client friendly
  - Easy to understand
  - Involve customers and clients in writing document
  
- Arhag housing association runs an 8-week community leadership programme for tenants. At the end of the training tenants are given a budget to set up a community project.

- In order to encourage tenants to be engaged, Merthyr Tydfil Housing Association has a fish and chip van which will give free fish and chips in return for completing a questionnaire. This helps reach a wide range of people.
- Greenfields Community Housing set their housing managers different targets dependent on the area they work allowing them to respond to local needs.
- It is possible to re-design blocks with residents in situ as was done by Portsmouth City Council on Wilmcote House, 3 high rise, multi-storey blocks. All methods were upgraded to Passivhaus standard with residents in situ. This method improved the standard of work and the end conditions. Even though it was expensive and cost over £100,000 per unit it was still cheaper than demolition.
- One model of demolition and rebuild that can work well is to replace homes or blocks small area by small area, so tenants just move once and everyone is guaranteed rehousing within the much improved site. Rayners Lane is a good example of this.