

Headlines from Housing Plus Academy Policy Workshop

Safe and Decent – Protecting Our Homes and Communities

14th May 2019, London School of Economics

1. Grenfell

- Grenfell has changed the way we view the safety of multi-storey buildings. We need change across the sector from Government to contractors. We need:
 - a) All tenants need to know and understand fire safety; landlords need to know and have a direct line of communication with all residents in every block they own; there needs to be a clear record of who lives in the building, including leaseholders and private tenants.
 - b) There should be a single point of control for all multi-storey buildings, such as an on-site caretaker or concierge.
 - c) Landlords need an accurate and continuous record of any works to the building. Some landlords are adding a new job role for a 'building safety manager' to ensure all information is accurate and up to date, and all safety measures are working as they should.
 - d) The government should establish an MOT for all social housing blocks to ensure safety and full repair.

2. Social Housing

- Social housing makes a valuable contribution to society. Therefore we need to make sure it is maintained to safe and decent standards.

3. Standards

- All owners of multi-storey buildings must meet adequate standards of safety. This applies not only to high rise blocks but all buildings. Multi-storey buildings are complex structures and require more complicated controls, record keeping and maintenance.
- The Decent Homes standard sets only a minimum standard, which is not seen as sufficient by many tenants. The current Decent Homes standard lays down a fitness standard for housing, including: repair, modern amenities, and thermal comfort. However the Decent Homes standard does not tackle energy saving or communal spaces, it is currently under review with a focus on energy saving.
- At the same time, the Decent Homes standard needs updating to take into account the changes in construction and housing industries since 2006, such as the emergence of new building materials and systems. At the same time, much of the existing stock needs upgrading, in insulation, energy saving, safety measures and security, particularly in communal areas.
- Some of the problems with the poor quality of repairs can be explained by the contracting system, including one big contractor being responsible for repairs covering very large areas with very varied stock. This often involves multiple sub-contractors, as in the case of Grenfell Tower, where supervision and controls are weaker. Smaller repairs contractors or in-house teams that cover defined and limited areas can be easier to manage and perform better. Bringing repairs teams in-house is a common response. For example on the Lancaster West Estate they have the W11 repairs team which includes a number of residents, and is based on the estate.

- The quality of homes in the private rented sector is increasingly important as social housing supply cannot meet all needs. Increasingly, private renting has become an alternative to the limited supply of social housing. Current standards in private renting are lower than in social renting and private renting is far less secure and in many places more expensive. Local authorities have limited powers to raise the quality of private renting.
4. Skills and quality
- There are barriers to implementing the necessary measures on the ground due to
 - lack of knowledge and awareness among some staff of the regulations or their application,
 - lack of clarity over what is required,
 - lack of training and supervision. Measures to tackle these deficiencies include training, apprenticeships, reintroduction of clerk of works, revised standards. Also, implementing the Hackitt review would be a big step forward.
5. Enforcement
- Weak enforcement is definitely a barrier to quality leading to poor performance by some landlords. This is exacerbated by a lack of a clear chain of control, where many actors and contractors are involved in the process.
 - It is important all building work is closely managed to ensure it is carried out correctly. A clerk of works can help ensure things are done properly. It is important they have the technical expertise to understand modern materials and building techniques.
 - Inspections should be carried out throughout the build process and not just at the end. Technical competence can be expensive which may be a challenge for some organisations.
6. Front line staff
- Local housing management can make all the difference in ensuring that homes are safe and decent, especially in the case of large social housing estates, multi-storey blocks, and large, dispersed landlords.
 - A local presence helps build trust with residents, giving a direct route to report problems.
 - A local presence also simplifies access by letting the landlord into their homes to carry out repairs and inspections.
 - Landlords gain by having much closer contact with their tenants and picking up directly on any problems.
7. Stock condition
- Landlords need to carry out regular stock condition surveys to build an accurate picture of problems, needs, gaps, poor performance etc. This will inform plans for effective investment. For example, Octavia Housing discovered in its stock condition survey a dominant issue relating to thermal efficiency. Different buildings need different treatment requirements, landlords need to make sure plans of works are adapted to the type of building.
 - Ensuring homes are energy efficient and contributing to environmental sustainability is increasingly important. This not only reduces the damage we are causing to the environment through the built environment, but is also tackling fuel poverty and extending the life of a block. This can be done in different ways.
For example:

- Full property upgrading to Passivhaus standard
- Internal or external wall insulation
- Replacing windows to improve insulation
- Adding solar panels or other forms of renewable energy
- MOT for all multi-storey blocks

8. Tenants

- Tenant engagement and buy-in is important in ensuring that homes are safe and decent.
- Tenants have the daily lived experience of their homes and buildings. This offers extremely useful evidence for the landlord in identifying and understanding how things are looking.
- Tenants need to be informed of the actions they need to take to ensure their homes are safe and understand the reasons for this.
- Landlords need regular contact with tenants to learn about any problems that need tackling. It is important that landlords take action on what tenants report. Responses need to match the problems; there is no blueprint or silver bullet. Ways to reach tenants and secure their feedback include:
 - Events like coffee mornings where people can chat to staff and give their views;
 - Follow-up phone calls following repairs work;
 - Tenancy audit visits in order to contact the tenants that landlords may not have regular contact with, and pick up on problems;
 - Supporting tenants in playing active roles such as Tenant Inspectors and forming residents' associations or estate forums.
- As an illustration of what can be done to ensure positive communication, Penge Churches Housing Association staff have an hour-long introductory meeting at the start of each tenancy to ensure that tenants understand both their direct responsibilities and the landlord's. This is followed up with a meeting after 6 weeks to work through any problems the new tenant has encountered. In doing this, the landlord and tenants start off on the basis of trust, openness and communication.

Landlords need to:

- Adopt a holistic approach to safety
- Establish and document clear evidence of the condition of all stock
- Keep clear records of any works that are carried out to individual blocks.
- Work closely with tenants ensure they understand their role in making housing safe.
- Develop transparent communication methods with tenants to make clear how the landlord is fulfilling its obligations, and what tenants' responsibilities are.
- Check current practice to determine whether they are achieving decent standards.
- Check yearly all safety measures and carry out full, in-depth fire inspections every year.
- Make a repair plan, set aside funding and deliver on time
- Employ a 'clerk of works' to oversee contracts
- Establish a single point of control within the organisation who is responsible for documenting and monitoring repairs, upgrading or remedial works; inform all tenants, leaseholders, and other services e.g. fire, police, who to contact in case of emergency.
- Make sure all staff understand and apply the current Decent Homes and safety standards

Recommendations to Government

- The Decent Homes standard should be updated in order to include safety measures, promote and enforce energy saving. There must be robust regulation of fire safety, consumer standards and building requirements.
- Include the communal areas and the environment around the homes and blocks themselves in the revised Decent Homes standard.
- Produce clear guidance so that landlords, builders, inspectors and tenants all understand what adequate standards of safety and decency require.
- Encourage local housing management. Designate and protect Local Council budgets to support essential personal services.
- Create an independent housing regulator to enforce standards.
- Give higher priority to standards in the private rented sector. Local authorities need the powers and the resources to enforce standards in the private rented sector.