

Headlines for Housing Plus Academy Workshop:

What will the Social Housing White Paper mean for tenants?

Friday 10th September, Trafford Hall, Chester

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, putting tenants at the centre of everything landlords do. This one-day workshop for tenants and support staff, held at Trafford Hall, home of the National Communities Resource Centre, was attended by 27 tenant and staff representatives from social landlords across the UK, explored what these changes would mean in practice for tenants.

During the Think Tank, we discussed how social landlords can strengthen and improve their dealings with their tenants; what tenants and residents hope to gain from the Social Housing White Paper, and what needs to happen next.

1. **The importance of the tenants' views:** Tenants' views need to be central to everything that landlords do, they are the ones that receive the service, and have a good knowledge of their homes and communities. They are often aware of issues that staff may not have noticed. By working with their tenants, landlords can deliver a better and more cost-effective service.
2. **Changes will take time:** The changes proposed in the White Paper will take time to become legislation. It is important that both government and landlords give residents clear timelines, so people know when to expect changes to happen. Landlords can "get ahead of the game" and many are already making changes in response to the White Paper in order to get ahead. For example, Wirral Methodist reviewed and then adapted their engagement strategy based on the White Paper. They now offer more open engagement with a mix of digital and face to face engagement
3. **Funding:** The White Paper introduces some major changes in the way landlords will work. Landlords need to find the resources to help them make these changes. It is not yet clear what funding will be available or where it will come from. Residents are concerned whether the changes will mean an increase in their rent or a reduction in budgets from other areas of housing management.

4. **Attitude of staff:** For resident engagement to be successful, it needs to be embedded into the culture of the organisation. All staff at every level should understand that relating to residents is central to their role. Staff need to be open and honest with residents. If they cannot do something they need to explain why and work together to find a solution. It is also important that organisations admit when they have done things wrong. When a staff member says they will change something, they need to make clear when this will happen so residents can hold them to account. It is also important for staff to explain changes to tenants in a way that's clear and avoid the use of jargon.

5. **A designated person in charge of health and safety: Subject to legislation** the White Paper states that every organisation should have a designated person in charge of health and safety. It is important residents not only know who this person is but have a direct way of communicating with them.

6. **Government engagement with residents:** The government is currently carrying out resident engagement around the White Paper, for example on complaints, building safety, and decent homes. This information will be used to help inform future policy making and help services.

7. **Different forms of engagement:** To help give all residents the chance to engage, it is important that a range of engagement options is offered. Watford Community Housing offer an "Engagement Menu", including a "main meal" option, which would involve being part of a tenant panel or board and "light bite" options, such as filling out a questionnaire or having a quick conversation with a member of staff. Events such as family fun days can be a good opportunity for staff to talk to residents who may not want to attend formal meetings. Landlords should also help remove barriers to people engaging, for example by providing some form of childcare for parents who want to attend meetings. Offering different forms of engagement helps a wider range of residents get involved and ensure that more than a few voices are being listened to.

8. **The role of complaints and the Housing Ombudsmen:** One of the key changes proposed in the White Paper is to change how the Housing Ombudsmen operates, and how tenants' complaints are dealt with. All should be dealt with 'promptly and fairly'. There has been a proposal in the new Building safety Bill to remove the eight-week waiting period, that a

resident has to wait before contacting the Ombudsmen. There will also be new deadlines put in place to ensure the Ombudsmen deals with complaints quickly. This will lead to faster decisions and outcomes for residents. However, it is important that the Ombudsman is given the resources to help make these changes. A 600-person residents' panel has been set up by the Housing Ombudsmen to examine key aspects of the Ombudsman's service. In order to support the changes to the Ombudsman, there will be an information campaign to make sure residents know how they can complain or escalate a complaint.

9. Residents need to feel valued, as those who get involved put a lot of time and effort into helping improve how their landlord performs and it is crucial to acknowledge this hard work. Residents get involved in order to make where they live the best it can be. It is also important that tenants can see real difference from their engagement, and clear evidence that their views have been taken onboard.
10. **Online versus in-person:** The COVID-19 pandemic forced tenants' meetings and other forms of engagement online or by telephone. In some cases, this has allowed people who wouldn't normally get involved to engage, as they may not have the time to go to a physical meeting but are happy to join a short zoom meeting. However, online activity does exclude people who do not have access to a computer, or the internet or who aren't "digitally savvy". You also lose the opportunity for face-to-face discussions. Moving forward, residents would like to see a blended model of in-person and online engagement.
11. **Encouraging young people to engage:** A majority of the residents involved in residents' panels and tenants' groups tend to be of an older generation. It is important efforts are made to involve younger people. Two big age bands are seriously underrepresented 18-35 and 35-50. One Vision Housing has set up a youth panel, which tries to focus on issues they know are important to young people, such as climate change. Hull City Council has set up a buddy scheme where they pair an involved resident with a younger resident who wants to become involved, so they can help them understand the role and the benefits involvement can bring.
12. **Going beyond landlord services:** Resident action can go beyond simply improving landlord services. Residents often have an in-depth knowledge of problems in the community and where help can be provided. Residents often want to take the initiative in tackling local

community problems. For example, since the pandemic, Community Gateway has set up a food bank and school uniform bank to respond to growing needs within their area.

13. **Training for tenant empowerment:** Tenants need the right skills to challenge their landlords and take action in their communities. It is crucial that social landlords offer training to all tenants who want to be involved. Several organisations are training tenants to deliver training to other tenants, as some tenants feel more comfortable engaging with other tenants who have the same lived experience as them. Funding needs to be made available by the government for dedicated tenant training and empowerment programmes, in order for residents to have to right tools and knowledge to hold landlords to account,

Messages to Government

At the end of the workshop, we asked each participant to identify their top messages to the government about what they think needs to change. Below the key themes are summarised:

- Residents needs and a quality landlords service need to be at the centre of what social landlords do.
- The government needs to continue to engage with and listen to residents, making sure that feedback is used and acted upon.
- Social landlords should reach out to all their residents and ensure that they gain a diversity of perspectives from their communities. One person leaderships in Residents Associations are damaging so it is important to 'seek out the quieter voices in our communities and hear what they have to say. Private tenants and leaseholders in social housing buildings must also be engaged.
- The government needs to increase its support for social housing to ensure that social landlords can complete repairs to a high standard, retrofit their properties, develop resident empowerment and build new homes for social rent, whilst implementing the changes in the Social Housing White Paper.
- Sustainability needs to be a high priority. All new homes should be built to high green standards and landlords should be provided with funding to retrofit their existing stock. The VAT on repairs should be reduced to encourage organisations to carry out repairs and retrofit projects should have no VAT at all.
- The Government needs to fund more social housing. Several participants emphasised that the term 'affordable housing' is meaningless and that 'affordable' should not be used to

replace social housing. The government needs to limit or even end the Right to Buy if they cannot ensure all homes are replaced with new social units.

Actions resulting from the Think Tank for residents groups

1. The key messages from the Social Housing White Paper need to be given to tenants in a simplified easy to read form so everyone can understand how things are going to change.
2. Landlords need to explain to tenants and staff how they view the White Paper, how it affects their work and approach, and what it will mean for tenants.
3. Landlords need to explain how the White Paper can improve homes, tenancies and neighbourhoods.
4. Training for staff and boards is needed so they know how to engage with tenants.
5. Tenants need training so they can engage with landlords in the most effective way, can run tenants' groups and understand their rights.
6. If the regulator fines landlords for non-compliance this could have a knock-on effect on the quality of repairs. It might be better to "name and shame" failing landlords, so the impact doesn't fall on the tenants.

Changes proposed by the Social Housing White paper

We were glad to have a government representative attend the Think Tank, he set out the key messages in the Social Housing White Paper. The Social Housing White Paper proposed many reforms that put considerable responsibility on landlords, but it also invites tenants of all ages and backgrounds to become involved and active in their communities for the proposals to work and deliver positive change. The following box summarises the way resident and landlord relations should work.

What changes will the Social Housing White Paper make?

The Social Housing White Paper has seven key sections, setting out what social housing residents should expect from their landlord, from the regulator and Ombudsman, and from government:

- *To be safe in your home. We will work with industry and landlords to ensure every home is safe and secure.*
- *To know how your landlord is performing, including on repairs, complaints and safety, and how it spends its money, so you can hold it to account.*
- *To have your complaints dealt with promptly and fairly, with access to a strong ombudsman who will give you swift and fair redress when needed.*
- *To be treated with respect, backed by a strong consumer regulator and improved consumer standards for tenants.*
- *To have your voice heard by your landlord, for example through regular meetings, scrutiny panels or being on its Board. The government will provide help, if you want it, to give you the tools to ensure your landlord listens.*
- *To have a good quality home and neighbourhood to live in, with your landlord keeping your home in good repair.*
- *To be supported to take your first step to ownership, so it is a ladder to other opportunities, should your circumstances allow¹.*

Source: The Charter for Social Housing Residents: Social Housing White Paper (published November 2020)