

Blog

The Housing Quality Network Cymru

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HQN Cymru members' update – 4 October 2018

The Heart of the Matter

Keith Edwards is acting as an adviser to the Regulator on its 'Tenants at the Heart of Regulation' review

I once heard a councillor from Liverpool say, "You can teach a parrot to say tenants at the heart – but does it really understand what it's saying?" As the suffragette slogan goes, it's 'deeds not words' that are important. Or to paraphrase Nye Bevan: verbs are more important than nouns. Both phrases make the point – it's what we do that counts, not what we call things.

Wales has for a long time been much more pro-social housing than our neighbours and consequently, more serious about engaging with tenants. But it feels like things have stalled and, in some cases, gone backwards in the past few years. That's why this review is timely.

So where do things stand? At a national level, Welsh Government has reduced funding by about 80%. The Tenant Empowerment Grant programme was wound up, funding for TPAS Cymru reduced and taken away completely from Welsh tenants and the Tenant Advisory Panel.

At a local level there is creeping disillusionment with tenant participation. A common frustration, landlords say, is that they can't attract new people to take part, drawing the conclusion that tenants aren't interested.

Landlords quite often mistake a lack of engagement for indifference. We all repeat the mantra that what we do has to be a 'two-way process'. Yet a lot of stuff that comes tenants' way is one directional PR – from old school glossy newsletters to new wave video clips – and tenants see through this. Kensington and Chelsea TMO regularly achieved approaching 90% satisfaction ratings for services – and tenants were told this at every opportunity. Constantly being told things were good to excellent, far from showing their landlord in a good light, fed widespread scepticism that flipped to anger the morning after the fire.

If this sounds gloomy it isn't meant to be. I recognise the huge efforts that go in day in, day out by landlord and tenant volunteers to genuinely make sure tenants are at the heart – from high level strategies to shaping local services.

Have I discovered a magic button to press to transform the way we work together? After 30 years the short answer is no. But there are lots of ideas out there, not least from tenants themselves. Here are some thoughts:

- It's OK to build on traditional engagement as well as embracing innovation – we don't need to pitch them against each other. This means getting the balance right between using technology and social media alongside face to face contact via meetings and forums. And, of course, we need to respect the right of people not to get involved.
- We have to get serious about cracking the chronic problem of increasing the diversity of tenants who engage – age, ethnicity, sexuality etc. We are blessed in Wales with a number of membership organisations committed to this agenda, such as TPAS Cymru, Tai Pawb, Cymorth Cymru. They know their members and are closer to the people they provide services for. Let's set them the challenge of together helping make this happen.
- We need the strongest message nationally that Welsh Government is going to back up its commitment to put tenants at the heart. This means thinking again about supporting an independent national tenant organisation.
- The present lack of grass roots activism should not be read as apathy. In Kensington and Chelsea, immediately after the fire, more widespread frustrations with the landlord burst through that were clearly pent up and unacknowledged. Genuine two-way communication – not polished PR – are the starting point in developing positive relationships.
- If results matter most to tenants, then we have a new suite of approaches to turn their ambitions into reality. Co-production – tenants and landlords re-designing strategies and services – has fundamentally changed the way Tai Tarian, Ateb, Hafod and others now engage. It should become the sector norm.
- Asset Based Community Development (ABCD) – building on community strengths rather than perceived needs – is taking root in Wales. This is much better aligned with what local people and their communities want to achieve.
- The myth that tenants aren't interested in strategic issues and governance needs to be busted. The success of the Merthyr Valleys Homes tenant/staff mutual is a case in point. And across Wales tenants are increasingly interested in issues like affordability and how their rents and service charges are set, how services will be improved and even what their CEO is paid.
- We need to find ways of breaking down barriers between housing association and council tenants. It surely can't be too hard to develop common approaches and share practice. And we should take the opportunity of the review to look again at domain regulation.

The tenant movement in the 70s and 80s arose out of real dissatisfaction with the quality of homes, repairs and rent levels. The strategy then was demonstration and direct action, particularly where landlords refused to listen or engage.

Tenant participation was a positive and proactive response to this. We need once more to concentrate on what really matters to tenants. In this review Wales has the chance to be radical and take things to the next level.

This is an abridged version of an article to be published in the winter 2018 issue of [Welsh Housing Quarterly](#)

About the author

Keith Edwards is a former Director of CIH Cymru and TPAS Cymru. He came to the housing sector via the trade union, co-operative and community development movements. As a consultant, he has worked for Welsh Government Ministers, the Housing Regulator and a number of local authorities, housing associations and private companies. He has wide experience of stakeholder involvement, developing strategy, option appraisals, designing new service models and supporting co-operative and mutual housing. He has particular expertise in helping organisation get the maximum social, economic and environmental benefits from their investment and service delivery, having set up and run the innovative i2i project for Welsh Government. Keith is Lead Associate for HQN Cymru.