

# Blog

## The Housing Quality Network

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### EDI aspects of the Green Paper

#### Introduction

HQN has covered the Social Housing Green Paper in some detail. The paper pledges to 'renew' the government's commitment to social housing and to 'kick-start a national conversation about its future'. It is open for consultation until Tuesday 6 November 2018, so this is your chance to comment and influence.

The consultation is divided into five themes. Every theme has a list of questions at the end for comment and there are 48 consultation questions in all. For more information on the questions, see "The Social Housing Green Paper: A new deal for social housing – consultation questions" by Colin Wiles ([click here](#) to download the briefing from the HQN resources section).

In truth, this green paper should be called the Grenfell Green Paper because it arises directly from that tragedy. Since then, the government has met with almost 1000 residents of social housing at events across England. They don't appear to have involved RSLs.

This briefing looks at the equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) aspects of the paper.

Although the Green Paper doesn't have in it anything explicitly about EDI, there are several areas which could have implications for EDI – or be used to improve diversity practice, particularly if we think of EDI more generally in terms of empowering tenants rather than specifically in relation to the 'protected characteristics' groups. It seems to me that there are two areas that are particularly relevant to EDI:

#### Listening to tenants

The Green Paper gives evidence that some RSLs are still unresponsive to tenants and discount what tenants say, and there is a lot in the paper about the need to listen and be responsive. This encouragement could be a driver for equality within RSLs. Here is an example from the paper:

## Case Study – The Housing Ombudsman resolving a complaint through local resolution

A tenant, who was registered blind, complained to the landlord about the condition of their property at the start of their tenancy. The tenant took steps to clean and redecorate the property and requested compensation from the landlord for the costs incurred. The landlord acknowledged that the property had not met its void standard, apologised and offered £140 in recognition of service failures such as the condition of the property, the failure to inform the tenant of procedures, and the cost of cleaning materials. The tenant was not happy with the landlord's offer and brought the complaint to the Housing Ombudsman. The Ombudsman facilitated a conference call between landlord and tenant and as a result the landlord increased its offer of compensation to £1,120 to cover the costs of works which would not have been incurred had the property met appropriate standards at the start of the tenancy, as well as for time and trouble. The tenant was satisfied with the result. The Ombudsman then asked the landlord to consider **how it works with vulnerable tenants**, they identified a number of lessons from the complaint and invited the tenant to join its local scrutiny panel.

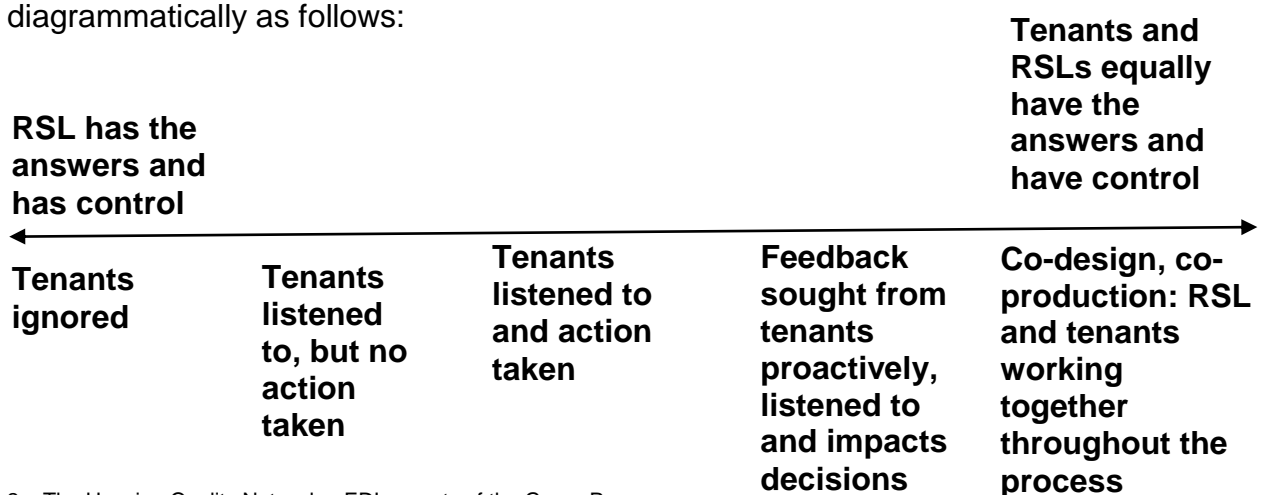
The case study highlights the importance of listening and feedback and raises the question of whether there are some groups whose feedback and proposals are more likely to be discounted by housing professionals, in this case, disabled as opposed to non-disabled tenants. Another example, in my experience, is that middle class tenants can often be listened to and their feedback acted on, more than working class tenants.

### A spectrum of involvement

It should be noted though that this is not just about listening. There are more aspects to involving and empowering tenants. For example:

- Inviting feedback proactively by creating spaces that make it possible for tenants to challenge RSLs to improve performance
- Giving residents a stronger voice to influence decisions: acting on tenants' feedback and ensuring their feedback does actually impact decision making
- Working proactively with tenants through co-design, co-production and community involvement.

These different degrees of involvement and participation can be represented diagrammatically as follows:



No doubt these issues are not black and white in most organisations, rather most organisations are somewhere between the two extremes on the spectrum above.

Arnstein's Ladder of Participation which goes from non-participation to tokenism to citizen control (<http://www.citizenshandbook.org/arnsteinsladder.html>) is also relevant here.

### **Involving tenants: co-design and co-production**

*All landlords should use customer feedback to improve services, and some are finding increasingly sophisticated ways to do this. Some landlords go further and actively work with residents to co-design services from the outset. However, landlords tell us that it is not always easy to engage all of their residents, particularly those who are vulnerable or isolated.*

Returning to the Green Paper, it highlights how different RSLs are involved with their tenants. There is very contrasting practice between:

*"If you ring the helpline you are treated with contempt and talked to as though you are a child who knows absolutely nothing."*

And:

*They are very tenant and community minded and have great Community Development and Tenancy Services Teams. They encourage and support community involvement. They take into account the 'all round' wellbeing of all tenants and their properties.*

It seems to me that both these issues highlight the power differential between RSL workers and their tenants and how some RSLs work to overcome these differentials, to empower tenants and get them involved in the work, whilst at the other end of the spectrum, others – rather shockingly in this day and age – show an attitude of disdain.

The paper proposes more regulation and KPIs as a way of encouraging RSLs towards tenant participation and empowerment. Personally, I believe that KPIs are too often subject to the Law of Unintended Consequences.

Moreover, this is a case of how housing professionals interact with tenants. This is more an organisational culture issue than one which can be adjusted by regulation. The proposed changes to regulation and giving regulator more powers is not likely, to my mind, to have much of an effect on equality and diversity in this respect.

One more comment on this area, which is more directly an equality issue. As the paper itself says above, there is also the question of which tenants are empowered – For example, tenants' panels can often be very white, and often composed of older people – often of course for practical reasons. Similarly, I raised the issue above of which groups are more likely to be listened to. There is a challenge, then, for RSLs to ensure they are getting feedback from, listening to, and co-designing and co-producing with a diverse group, representative of all their tenants.

## Tackling stigma

*Residents told us [I am] stigmatised for being in social housing and treated as a second-class citizen. I am made to feel less of a person than the person that has bought their house. [My main concern is] the perception of council tenants as benefit scroungers when there are many tenants who are hardworking, honest people.*

Finally, there is tackling stigma – not an issue concerned with RSLs improving their diversity practice but rather about equality and diversity in society more generally – and removing stigma would impact on RSLs, not just tenants.

Yet the drive in the Green Paper and in our culture generally towards home ownership (“An Englishman’s (sic) home is his castle”) is actually part of what establishes the culture of stigma towards tenants and social housing tenants in particular so there seems to me to be a contradiction here.

One final thought: it’s interesting that this paper has been sparked by the Grenfell Tragedy. So, did this have anything to do with EDI? The documentary ‘Before Grenfell’ showed the history of the area and the sharp divide between rich and poor that, with moving boundaries, has always characterised this area.

I was abroad when Grenfell happened, so the bits I picked up on the news were all about the cladding, the inability of people to get out, the lack of sprinklers and so on. A tragedy due to technical, housing issues apparently. The day I got back to the UK the paper had a ‘spread’ on the inside page with the photos and names of many of those who had died. You only had to take one look to realise that equality and inclusion were fundamental to deciding who lived – and died – there.

Whilst the Green Paper may give some encouragement to improved diversity practice it does not seem to address at all these wider, bigger issues.

## About the author

Colin Heyman is the new lead for HQN's re-launched Equality and Diversity Network. He works for consultancy firm Maine-stream that has worked in the field of both EDI, and leadership, for over 25 years.

You can find out more about Colin and his thoughts on equality and diversity in the housing sector in his debut introductory blog [here](#).