

Blog

The Residents' Network

December 2018

Getting ahead of the game: The Residents' Network Annual Conference 2018

Rob Gershon reports back from this year's Residents' Network Annual Conference, where a wide range of speakers gave different aspects around 2018's theme: what are staff and residents doing to get ahead of the likely findings of the social housing green paper?

There is a kind of stasis in the housing sector at the moment, and a lot of it relates to waiting for other people to make decisions.

Since I first started working with the Residents' Network at the beginning of 2016, there has always been something to wait for in the areas our members work in: co-regulation, scrutiny, co-production and finding different ways to meet the expectations of the consumer standards around tenant involvement and empowerment.

We have waded through the Housing and Planning Act 2016 to see what would become of policies that didn't seem to make any sense: Pay to Stay; the ending of lifetime tenancies; a seemingly small 1% rent reduction that has huge implications for what councils, housing associations, ALMOs and all forms of social landlord can budget for.

We waited for the housing white paper, which promised to fix the housing market and didn't, and although it has wrapped up submissions for its first phase, we will likely be waiting much longer for the final findings of the Grenfell Inquiry.

The social housing green paper – which the sector waited longer than expected to arrive and will now have to wait for the next phase to be announced – lays down some fundamental markers for where housing policy is headed in the near future.

At the conference, Jane Everton, deputy director for social housing at the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, gave an overview of progress so far. Despite remaining questions about league tables, it seems the government is keen to press for a measure of quality based on the experiences of tenants, especially around complaints and the way that they are handled.

The ministry is currently working to meet the green paper's stated aim to "rebalance the relationship between social landlords and tenants", in large part as a response to issues raised from the wider implications of the Grenfell Tower Fire.

This new goal sits alongside guaranteeing the Regulator of Social Housing has the resources it needs to ensure landlords are governed correctly and are financially viable, which has always been the regulator's role.

Although Jane could not talk about specific measures in the green paper, its key chapters – safety, effective resolution of complaints, empowering residents and strengthening the regulator, and tackling stigma in addition to ongoing goals around providing housing supply – certainly reflect the major tenant concerns raised at ministerial and green paper events held by HQN and others, and in many of the conversations happening online about what comes next.

Following Jane was John Boughton, a social historian who is also the author of 'Municipal Dreams: The Rise and fall of social housing', which has become an influential text in considering how not just houses, but communities, neighbourhoods and homes are built.

John highlighted that stigmatisation is by no means a new thing, with council and social housing developments over the last 100 years all having created some form of anxiety and often prejudice in the expectations of people about to move in to mixed communities together.

John also questioned our beliefs about placemaking, summarising that whatever the intentions of architects and well-meaning community designers, it is ultimately people who form and run communities.

Greg Beales, director of policy and campaigns at Shelter was due to talk next but was replaced at the last minute by Chris Wood, recently appointed head of policy. As the Shelter commission is something else the English housing sector is waiting for, with a report launch scheduled for 8 January, Chris was also not really in a position to discuss specifics but hinted that the report will focus on some well-known areas such as housing supply, but would tie together some of the day-to-day work that Shelter does around homelessness and its prevention with the issues raised in the green paper.

Chris talked specifically about changes being considered around regulation, reflecting that whether a tenant has a private or social landlord there are some basic levels of accommodation and behaviour tenants should expect.

Questions from the audience to Chris focussed on much wider issues, too, around whether the commission has anything to say about welfare reforms and other housing policy, and even whether there is a problem with reports if they do not grab the attention of decision and policy-makers!

Just before lunch, Jonathan Lawn, head of people services and communications at Phoenix Community Housing, talked about how, as London's first resident-led housing association, many of the issues that others might need to consider making changes for in the green paper can be met now.

If the government brings some of its ideas to life, Phoenix are already ahead of the game because in that fundamental area the ministry says it is going to focus on, rebalancing the relationship between landlords and tenants, Jonathan's organisation has already undergone a transformation.

Working alongside more than 3,500 "shareholder" tenants, staff at Phoenix do not have to guess whether they are providing the right services because what to deliver is designed alongside tenants. The complaints process does not need to undergo a transformation to meet any expectations from forthcoming regulation because it is run alongside tenants, and

areas like the recruitment of new staff are not done without specially trained tenants recruiting and selecting candidates.

Even in its new endeavours as a developing association, Phoenix has consulted its democratic body of tenants to find out what kinds of homes their community needs – in this case smaller homes to enable older residents to downsize and free up some unwanted larger homes that will be able to help address local housing waiting lists.

Lunch went down very well, with attendees seeming to go for the healthier options as late arrivals to the buffet like me found there was no broccoli left. It was also a chance for delegates to reflect on some of the issues raised in the morning sessions and to compare notes about what people from other organisations are doing.

One of the recurring take-aways from the conference was that there is nothing to stop landlords from reviewing and improving their complaints processes right now without having to wait for eventual regulation or even legislation.

Attendees heard from many contributors later in the day to explain how this was being done, with Sam Leigh from Yarlinton Homes outlining that the green paper had prompted the landlord to review with customers whether the complaints process worked, with the organisation completely restructuring it when they realised it did not.

Michelle Hocknull and Matt Smart from Stonewater presented a practical demonstration of the landlord's "customer hubb" (not a misspelling as hubb stands for "helping us be better") looking at how a community-focused digital platform serves both to bring communities together when the landlord is spread over many counties, and to proactively address issues that tenants might be having before they need to have a complaint raised.

Wellingborough Homes presentation on its customer assembly talked a lot about some of the issues raised in the green paper and in other areas.

Reflecting that fairly recent changes at the housing regulator have meant a focus on ensuring that if there are tenant board members there should be positions filled on the basis of skills, the Wellingborough approach seeks to ensure that there are other ways of ensuring voices are heard, by strengthening networks and relationships across areas that allow tenants to meaningfully contribute to governance, and that result in training for residents.

As with Yarlinton's transformation, there was a focus on no longer seeing "involvement" as a particular function performed by a particular team but embedding a culture where everyone is working to a similar approach, so that "customer" inputs occur all across the organisation.

One of the main features of Yarlinton's "Next gen" approach has also been a revamped digital doorway – enabling tenants who are able to use a digital platform to make more efficient use of the time they spend interacting with their landlord and freeing up staff to help those who might not be able to.

With promising signs for the future, transforming their complaints process, centralising the staff team and offering simpler access through technology has seen Yarlinton increase its customer satisfaction between 2017 and 2018 from 74% to 90%.

Later in the afternoon, two tenants, Ann Harris and Sally Trueman from the voice for tenants steering group, managed to keep everyone awake and laughing with a gentle comparison with the ongoing meetings between ministers and tenants around the country being a bit like a form of speed-dating.

There have been three housing ministers since the group was formed, and it was interesting to hear a little bit about its involvement in helping to choose where the three housing ministers visited, and where the most recent one is still visiting, to help shape the future of an independent voice for tenants.

Ann elicited the loudest round of applause for the day when she talked about combating negative stereotypes and stigma, challenging many of the ideas about tenants being lazy and feckless – and indeed workless – by reminding the hall that much of the work that goes on to make neighbourhoods and communities is done without recognition and certainly without pay by tenants themselves.

These contributions are largely ignored in the wider debate about social value, and Ann demonstrated a system which enables tenants to keep track of the kinds of work they do online.

The day raised many questions that individuals and organisations will have to take away and ponder, but also offered some practical examples being implemented right now in different organisations, about how landlords, tenants, residents and customers can work together to make organisations and the things they do better.

Future policy might still be unclear, and a wide range of other factors like welfare reform are still driving what many landlords do around employment support and tenancy sustainability, but as the collection of different solutions raised at conference plays out into 2019, we will be sure to keep tabs on which ones will meet whatever new expectations arise.

About the author

Rob Gershon is a social housing tenant, full time carer and housing blogger. He posts opinion pieces on 24 Housing, commenting on housing from a tenant's point of view. He joined The Residents' Network as an associate in January 2016.