It feels a peculiar journey to have travelled. From bedroom tax blogging and impertinent questions about housing policy, to becoming Lead Associate of HQN's Residents' Network.

Before I was a full time carer or a council house tenant for the second time, I was a reluctant programmer and enthusiastic systems analyst. It's been interesting to use some of those powers to review data in the 'Form Follows Function' project: survey responses from residents on what they want from housing association mergers and organisational changes.

I had to think carefully about how to interpret some of the replies. All responses were made on the understanding they were anonymous. For some residents this was an opportunity to voice concerns and anger about being excluded from decision-making. These important responses were some of the most difficult to quantify.

Many responses showed some landlords are already including residents in discussions about mergers. Some organisations are getting it right by including residents in these processes.

I've been sharing some of the findings at Residents' Network's quarterly networking events. For our members – staff and residents involved co-regulation, governance and scrutiny, the question of whether residents should be consulted on major changes has only one answer.

However, even where successful relationships have been established, it almost feels as if expert tenants have to be on their toes at all times. There's a need to make sure the best interests of residents are not something designed by somebody else. Even where trust has been established, there's a sense in a lot of the feedback that it can easily be made fragile again.

Many respondents shared a concern for the sustainability of the businesses of their landlords, in addition to that of the services they receive from them.
In a year in which some high-profile mergers have become presumably very expensive failures, there was a focus on some key issues in our feedback, including concerns that mergers would result in a rise in rents. Fundamental things like repairs and maintenance were also important. Sometimes residents felt services should be preserved, while others hoped change would lead to improvements where landlords are perceived as not getting them right.

There were few 'cultural differences' in resident responses. This should provide food for thought for planning future mergers. Wherever they are, whatever size of landlord (and whatever their elaborately crafted comms message) residents shared a desire to live in safe, genuinely affordable homes while having a say in businesses in which they feel a sense of ownership and sometimes even pride.

Many made it clear it's necessary for organisations to bring residents on board much earlier in the process. Some felt they were presented with final plans for changes and expected to rubber stamp decisions already been made, without having a chance to discuss alternatives.

Some saw resident consultation as a chance to improve relationships between tenants and staff where organisations increasingly feel distant, in some cases as a result of mergers taking away local staff and contact points. Some replies voiced a greater sense of disconnection from housing organisations in general.

Most responses were positive and showed a high level of understanding on what works for homes and communities. There was a desire to make landlords understand this, too. Some issues of trust still need to be addressed and the way feedback and input are valued is clearly still making some residents frustrated and occasionally angry.

In much the same way that landlords should think about the principles underpinning any proposed merger or organisational change, they should also understand that paying lip service to residents is not enough. It requires proper engagement, a level of flexibility and a willingness to listen and respond to feedback rather than ploughing on regardless.
About the author

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